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Nietzsche's Buddhist *Leidmotive:* A Comparative Study of Nietzsche's Response to the Problem of Suffering

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Nietzsche's Buddhist *Leidmotive:* A Comparative Study of Nietzsche's Response to the Problem of Suffering

by

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Dedication

In loving memory of my parents

Larry and Patricia Roddy

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May any merit that arises from this work benefit all sentient beings…

Nietzsche's Buddhist *Leidmotive:* A Comparative Study of Nietzsche's Response to the Problem of Suffering

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I argue in this dissertation that Nietzsche's struggle to free himself from Schopenhauer and Wagner's influence interferes with his understanding of Buddhism, which he tends to tar with the same brush that he used on his mentors. I claim that Nietzsche has more in common with Mahayana Buddhism than he realizes, and suggest that he would have had more sympathy for Buddhist strategies for confronting suffering if his conception of such strategies had been more adequate. I offer a reading of the eternal recurrence according to which it promotes an existential reorientation towards the present moment that is very much in the spirit of Zen. I contend that the apparently irresoluble differences between the Nietzschean and Buddhist positions on questions relating to a karmic "moral world order" can be overcome on a careful interpretation, and that there are more than superficial parallels between the way that both Nietzsche and Zen thinkers ascribe spiritual significance to a certain kind of spontaneous action.

Key to Abbreviations

With the exception of the *Selected Letters*, parenthetic references to works by Nietzsche in the text are to section numbers, not page numbers. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* and *The Portable Nietzsche* each contain several complete works. For posthumous fragments not included in *The Will to Power*, I have relied on the *Digital Critical Edition of the Complete Works and Letters* published online by Nietzsche Source, and have cited according to the standard system used therein. Full details of all the texts listed below can be found in the bibliography at the back.

AOM	*Assorted Opinions and Maxims* (Volume II, part one of *Human, All Too Human*)
AC	*The Antichrist*
BGE	*Beyond Good and Evil*
BT	*The Birth of Tragedy*
BW	*Basic Writings of Nietzsche*
CW	*The Case of Wagner*
D	*Daybreak*
DS	*David Strauss the Confessor and the Writer* (First *Unfashionable Observation*)
EH	*Ecce Homo*
GM	*On the Genealogy of Morals*
GS	*The Gay Science*
HAH	*Human, All Too Human*
HL	*On the Utility and Liability of History for Life* (Second *Unfashionable Observation*)
NCW	*Nietzsche Contra Wagner*
NF	Nachgelassene Fragmente (Posthumous fragments in the online *Digital Critical Edition*)
NR	*The Nietzsche Reader*
PN	*The Portable Nietzsche*
RWB	*Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* (Fourth *Unfashionable Observation*)
SE	*Schopenhauer as Educator* (Third *Unfashionable Observation*)
SL	*Selected Letters*
TI	*Twilight of the Idols*
UW	*Unpublished Writings from the Period of Unfashionable Observations*
WLN	*Writings from the Late Notebooks*
WP	*The Will to Power*
WS	*The Wanderer and His Shadow* (Volume II, part two of *Human, All Too Human*)
Z	*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

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Introduction

If white turns into black some people say "Essentially it is still the same." And others, if the colour becomes one degree darker, say "It has changed *completely*."
—Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* 42e

Against mediators.—Those who want to mediate between two resolute thinkers show that they are mediocre; they lack eyes for seeing what is unique. Seeing things as similar and making things the same is the sign of weak eyes.
—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 228

Question: "In what way do my feet resemble the feet of a donkey?"
Answer: "When the heron stands in the snow, its color is not the same."
—Zen dialogue[1]

1. Opening Remarks

Nietzsche's vicious attack on Christianity—his "war to the death against depravity" as he calls it—is infamous ("Decree against Christianity" qtd. in Shapiro 212). Christian beliefs are false and pernicious. Christian ethics dignify weakness. He deprecates Christianity because, he believes, its antagonism to life constitutes a perversion of nature. His vituperation reaches an acme in the closing section of *The Antichrist*: "I call Christianity the one great curse, the one great innermost corruption, the one great instinct of revenge, for which no means is poisonous, stealthy, subterranean, *small* enough—I call it the one immortal blemish of mankind" (62).

[1] Qtd. in Doumulin 247

His comparatively moderate critique of Buddhism is far less prominent in his writings and consequently less well-known. While Buddhism belongs for him with Christianity as a religion of decadence, he considers it to be superior to Christianity in several respects. Unlike Christianity, Buddhism as he sees it is a noble religion that arose among the higher classes. Owing to this origin, he believes, Buddhism is free from *ressentiment* and unreason:

> I hope that my condemnation of Christianity has not involved me in any injustice to a related religion with an even larger number of adherents: *Buddhism*. Both belong together as nihilistic religions—they are religions of decadence—but they differ most remarkably…. Buddhism is a hundred times more realistic than Christianity: posing problems objectively and coolly is part of its inheritance, for Buddhism comes after a philosophical movement which spanned centuries. The concept of "God" had long been disposed of when it arrived. Buddhism is the only genuinely positivistic religion in history. This applies even to its theory of knowledge (a strict phenomenalism): it no longer says "struggle against *sin*" but, duly respectful of reality, "struggle against *suffering*." Buddhism is profoundly distinguished from Christianity by the fact that the self-deception of moral concepts lies far behind it. In my terms, it stands *beyond* good and evil. (AC 20)

Moderate in matters of diet and hygiene, Buddhism shuns the extremes of asceticism, a type of cruelty towards oneself. Indeed, Nietzsche calls the Buddha a "profound physiologist" (EH 1.6), which is high praise coming from him. He commends

what he sees as the "personal egoism" that typifies the emphasis placed on freeing *oneself* from suffering, and which he takes to be a necessary countermeasure to dissipation of the self-centred instincts (AC 20). "Cheerfulness, calm, and freedom from desire are the highest goal," he writes, "and the goal is *attained.* Buddhism is not a religion in which one merely aspires to perfection: perfection is the normal case" (AC 21). Christianity is a religion for barbarians; Buddhism is for the over-civilized:

> The Buddhist religion is the expression of a fine evening, a perfect sweetness and mildness—it is gratitude toward all that lies behind, and also for what is lacking: bitterness, disillusionment, rancour; finally, a lofty spiritual love; the subtleties of philosophical contradiction are behind it, even from these it is resting: but from these it still derives its spiritual glory and sunset glow. (WP 154)

One must be careful, however, not to take everything positive that Nietzsche says about Buddhism at face value. His sympathetic sketch of the religion in *The Antichrist*—while sincere enough—serves largely as a kind of rhetorical "anti-foil" to place Christianity in the worst possible light. With respect to Buddhism for its own sake, it does not appear that his interest in it was especially great.

Mervyn Sprung presents evidence of some familiarity with Asian thought on Nietzsche's part from an early age, and of his probable exposure to it in Schulpforta. In his first year in Bonn he attended lectures in which Indian philosophy was touched on. And, of course, there is his youthful adoration of Schopenhauer, and his lifelong friendship with

Paul Deussen (an academic Sanskritist and comparative philosopher, who published the pioneering study, *The Philosophy of the Vedas*). In a letter of 1875, Nietzsche writes to Deussen of his "eagerness, [himself] to drink from the spring of Indian philosophy which [Deussen] will one day open up," and in 1888 he writes that his "trans-European eye" enables him to see that "Indian philosophy is the only major parallel to our European philosophy" (qtd. in Sprung 76). The argument of *The Birth of Tragedy* relies on the Sanskrit term *māyā*, or illusion, and the epigraph to *Daybreak*—"There are so many days that have not yet broken"—is a quotation from the *Ṛg Veda*.

Yet, on the whole, it does not appear that Nietzsche cared too much for Asian thought. The historian of ideas Thomas Brobjer, who has done extensive research on Nietzsche's reading, concludes in an article on "Nietzsche's Reading about China and Japan" that "his interest in and knowledge of Chinese culture was not non-existent, though limited" (329), and that "on the whole, his view of Chinese culture seems not to significantly differ from that of most Europeans in the nineteenth century" (334). On the rare occasions that Nietzsche does refer to China, it is usually to dismiss its perceived stagnation. As for Japanese culture, Brobjer notes that his knowledge of that "seems to have been basically non-existent" (329).

And in "Nietzsche's Reading about Eastern Philosophy," Brobjer, on the basis of an extensive analysis of Nietzsche's library, concludes that "Nietzsche did have some interest in and knowledge of Eastern thought, primarily Indian philosophy, but…that it was less than most commentators have assumed, and less than one would expect from someone who had been philosophically brought up on Schopenahuerian philosophy (and less than that of most

of his friends and acquaintances)" (3). There are not that many quotations from Indian texts in his work, and little evidence of careful reading in Indian philosophy in his archive: his books on the subject (including Deussen's) are not very heavily annotated. Also, and perhaps most revealingly, he never discusses the subject with Deussen in their considerable correspondence.

So, for all Nietzsche's talk of his "trans-European eye," he is undeniably Eurocentric. He was fascinated by Classical Greece and Rome, and (to a lesser degree) by the civilization of the Renaissance. These former cultures constitute for him the paradigm of greatness; ancient India and ancient China do not really figure. Compared to the amount of space that he devotes to Christianity, that devoted to Buddhism is negligible. Nor is any immediate Indian influence discernible in his work. *Prima facie* then it appears that his relation to Buddhist thought is not a promising area for research. But the question of Nietzsche's affinity to Buddhism is more interesting than that of his direct engagement with it.

In spite of Nietzsche's dominant voluntarism, there is an undercurrent of ecstatic quietism that flows through his thought. "The tempest of desires sometimes draws a man up to a height where all desires cease," he writes on one occasion: "to that height where he truly *loves* and dwells in a better state of being even more than in a better state of volition" (AOM 273). His mysticism, such as it is, has received far less scholarly attention than it warrants, especially among his commentators of a more analytical bent. Yet he sounds mystical notes throughout his work from the onset to the end. In the opening sentence of *The Birth of Tragedy*, he urges us to grasp his thesis "not merely by

logical inference, but with the immediate certainty of intuition," and in the last paragraph of his last published work (save for a quotation from *Zarathustra*), he writes of "Saying yes to life…in order to be *oneself* the eternal joy of becoming, beyond all terror and pity" (TI 10.5). Zarathustra has numerous mystical experiences that meet the four criteria William James proposed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* in being ineffable, noetic, transient and passive. And Nietzsche repeatedly espouses such mystical views as the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Nicholas of Cusa ("midnight too is noon; pain too is a joy; curses too are a blessing" (Z 4.19.10)); the non-duality of subject and object ("these distinctions are fabricated and are now imposed as a schematism upon all the apparent facts" (WP 548)); and the merely apparent nature of evil (*"The world is perfect"* (AC 57)).

But besides this general element of mysticism, there are more specific features of Nietzsche's thought that correspond to central features of Buddhism, including his preoccupation with the problem of suffering, a strong sense of the impermanence and interdependence of all things, and a sustained and sophisticated deconstruction of the concept of a unified enduring self. In a passage from her study on the eternal return, Joan Stambaugh lists some of the main parallels:

> The affinities of Nietzsche's thought in general…to…ideas of Buddhism, are astonishing. The denial of substance, of the soul, of the universal, and of duration; an emphasis on suffering in the sense of ontological restlessness, on the absolute order of the world ("causality" not in the sense of efficient cause or even of the other Aristotelian causes, but in the

> sense of dependent origination, of things arising together, of the absolute momentariness of the Will to Power)—all are present in Nietzsche and in Buddhism. Other elements, too, which cannot be formulated as "doctrines"—for example, the rejection of theoretical knowledge as its own end, or the manner of communication together with the question of what can be communicated—bring Nietzsche very close to Buddhism. (18)

Despite these many parallels however, relatively few book-length studies on the subject of Nietzsche and Buddhism have been undertaken. Apart from the eccentric *Nietzsche und der Buddhismus* by the devoted Wagnerian Max Ladner that was published in 1933, there have been two scholarly works both titled *Nietzsche and Buddhism* published in the twentieth century: the first by Freny Mistry in 1981, and the second by Robert Morrison in 1997. Both of these works have their merits, but my purposes in writing this dissertation differ from Mistry's and Morrison's in several key respects.

First, Mistry and Morrison deal almost exclusively with early Buddhism, but I want to bring Nietzsche into dialogue with some figures like Śāntideva, Huineng, and Dōgen from the later Mahāyāna tradition. Ironically, Nietzsche does not appear to have been at all familiar with Mahāyāna Buddhism; if he had been, aspects of it would probably have appealed to him much more strongly than early Buddhism as he understood it did. For instance, Indian Mahāyāna Buddhists censure their predecessors for tendencies which Nietzsche would call "life-denying," such as an overly dualistic conception of nirvana as a kind of "true world" beyond the illusory round of birth and

death. And Chinese and Japanese forms of Buddhism such as Hua-yen and Zen—which were greatly influenced by Daoist naturalism—stress a type of immanent spirituality that Nietzsche would have found particularly congenial.

Second, Mistry and Morrison devote most of their attention to metaphysical and epistemological issues, whereas I want to confine my focus more narrowly to the topic of suffering, and themes in Nietzsche's thought that relate to that topic. Although the problem of suffering is of paramount importance to Nietzsche, it has not received as much attention in the secondary literature as certain other of his more peripheral concerns.

And third, my intention in writing this dissertation is not to engage in a conventional comparative study of "Nietzsche and Buddhism." Any attempt to "compare and contrast" the work of one European man over two decades or so and a twenty-five hundred year old pan-Asian religious cum philosophical tradition will clearly pose methodological problems. Abelard, in his *Sic et Non*, juxtaposed a compilation of contradictory passages from the writings of the Church Fathers. His collection was intended for dialecticians, to whet the edge of their ingenuity. The devil can cite Scripture for his own purpose, and so on. But at least there is a *semblance* of unity to the Bible. The position with respect to Buddhism is worse. While a definitive canon in the Pāli language exists for the Theravada School, Mahāyāna sutras are extant in three languages and have never been arranged into a comprehensive system. In short, there are any number of different—and not necessarily compatible—Buddhisms, and there is no need to remind Nietzsche scholars of all the tensions and apparent contradictions in his

thought. Thus a real danger in writing on Nietzsche and Buddhism is that one may end up cherry picking passages to support a preconceived interpretation, and may turn oneself into just the kind of reader that Nietzsche condemns: "The worst readers…behave like plundering troops: they take away a few things they can use, dirty and confound the remainder, and revile the whole" (AOM 137).

My aim is not to present a new interpretation of Buddhism, but an interpretation of Nietzsche's thinking from a broadly Mahāyāna Buddhist perspective. I would like to think that Nietzsche would recognize himself in my portrayal of him, though of course there is no way of knowing if he would. I try to avoid distorting his thought by following several methodological guidelines. First, I pay a good deal of attention to the influences on his intellectual development; second, I observe diachronic distinctions, and draw on passages from the *Nachlass* only to the extent that they clarify published passages; and third, I endeavour to respect the organic integrity of Nietzsche's work by resisting the temptation to seize on atypical and one-off remarks. On the contrary, I only give significant interpretative weight to recurring ideas taken in context.

What I want to do then in this dissertation is not exactly to compare "Nietzsche and Buddhism," but to read Nietzsche with certain Buddhist themes in mind as a way of getting a fresh hermeneutic purchase on his concerns. I want to look out of a Buddhist window at Nietzsche,[2] so to speak: hopeful of throwing light on aspects of his writing that might otherwise be left in the shadows, but mindful of Dōgen's tenet that "when one side is illuminated the other side is dark" (*Moon in a Dewdrop* 70).

[2] Compare "I loved to look now out of this window, now out of that" (WP 410).

2. Dissertation Plan

The plan of the dissertation is as follows. The first part comprises a chapter each on Schopenhauer and Wagner. These two figures had a greater influence on Nietzsche than did any other individual, and it is impossible to understand him as a thinker or a person without some appreciation of their impact on his life. In these two chapters I try to show how Nietzsche's struggle to free himself from the hold of his overbearing mentors—both of whom were very interested in Buddhism—interfered with his ability to assess Buddhism *per se*.

Schopenhauer's role in transmitting ideas about Buddhism to Nietzsche is the topic of chapter one. I begin with the questions of Schopenhauer's debt to Indian philosophy, and of Nietzsche's debt to Schopenhauer. I then take a look at some differences between Schopenhauer's thought and Buddhist philosophy, and I end by pointing out that Nietzsche inclines to overlook these differences and to conflate the two.

In chapter two I treat some issues raised by three of Wagner's greatest works. After a glance at the relationship between Wagner and Nietzsche, I consider the effect on the latter of Wagner's eroticization of the idea of nirvana in *Tristan and Isolde*. I then move on to consider Nietzsche's disappointment with what he saw as a negative Schopenhauerian Buddhist influence on Wagner's revision of *The Ring*. Finally I argue that Nietzsche's hostility to Buddhism derives in part from his hostility to the sentimental compassion idealized in *Parsifal*.

The second part of the dissertation comprises four chapters loosely patterned on the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, namely the truths of suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path thereto. Thus chapter three is on the problem of suffering and compassion. Chapter four is on eternal recurrence, which can be associated with *saṃsāra,* or the round of birth and death, and the prospect of which, as the "greatest weight" can be thought of as a root cause of suffering. Chapter five is on karma, self-cultivation, and *amor fati*, or love of fate, an ideal state of mind for Nietzsche in which suffering is overcome. Chapter six is on action theory and the phenomenology of a way of acting that promotes an attitude of *amor fati* and a kind of "tranquility in disturbance."

In chapter three I begin by considering some parallels between the way that Nietzsche deals with the problem of suffering and the way that theists deal with the problem of evil. I go on to distinguish suffering from pain, and the escape from suffering from the overcoming of it; and argue on the basis of these distinctions that Nietzsche would have had more sympathy for Buddhist strategies for confronting suffering if he had understood them more clearly. In the second half of the chapter I examine Nietzsche's critique of compassion in order to see whether his criticisms of what he takes compassion to be are applicable to the Buddhist virtue of *karuṇā.* I argue that his perceptive but selective attack on compassion is largely irrelevant to the kind of compassionate action that Mahāyāna Buddhists advocate.

Next in chapter four I claim that eternal recurrence can best be read as Nietzsche's response to the existential problem of impermanence that results from the loss of his Christian faith. I examine six different readings of recurrence under three headings that I

associate with the three main periods of his thought: two aesthetic readings, two scientific readings, and finally two religious readings. I argue that Nietzsche's solution to the problem of impermanence involves drawing on the thought of recurrence in order to live somewhat like a Zen practitioner who focuses his attention on the present moment.

In chapter five I criticize the attempt to present the doctrine of karma as providing a solution to the existential problem of evil by accounting for the prevalence of so much seemingly undeserved suffering in the world. I argue that while a "cosmodicical" reading of the doctrine is untenable in view of various metaphysical, epistemological and ethical difficulties, there are alternative readings that are less problematic. I first present a naturalized psychological theory of karma that has much in common with Nietzsche's philosophy of self-cultivation, and then outline an "ecological" theory of karmic interdependence that bears comparison with his idea of *amor fati.*

Finally, in chapter six, I examine some competing theories of action. I note that although the belief-desire model is generally agreed to be theoretically preferable to alternative accounts of action such as agent-causation and volitionism, it gives rise to pragmatic and existential issues which many of its proponents have been reluctant to acknowledge. I argue that Nietzsche did recognize the challenge that the standard model of action poses for our traditional self-conception and that he attempted to meet this challenge by developing an approach which I call meta-compatibilism. This approach—according to which the felt distinction between actions and events is blurred or overcome in certain states of consciousness—contributes to his thinking about *amor fati*, and is analogous to Zen Buddhist and Daoist notions of *wu wei*, or spontaneous activity.

Part 1

The Influence of Schopenhauer and Wagner

Chapter 1

Schopenhauer

1. Introduction

Schopenhauer, although he was not an Indologist and did not take the trouble to learn Sanskrit, was very knowledgeable for a non-specialist on the subject of Indian religion and philosophy. He read as widely as he could in the area—his posthumous library contained between 130 and 150 Orientalist items, depending on whose list of titles one accepts (Nicholls 197)—and he refers to Indian thought repeatedly in his own writings. Of course, there is considerable disagreement among scholars about the seriousness and significance of Schopenhauer's engagement with the South Asian tradition. In his introduction to *Interpreting Across Boundaries*, a 1988 collection of essays on comparative philosophy, Gerald Larson disparages Schopenhauer's work in this field as "hardly worth mentioning" and claims that his "exuberant affirmation of matters non-European is clearly a case for the psychoanalyst" (Larson 7-8). But while some of Schopenhauer's obsessions—much like Nietzsche's—may indeed invite a psychoanalytic approach, they are not exhausted by it, and subsequent scholarly work makes such a casual dismissal of his Indophilia difficult to sustain. Schopenhauer's understanding of Indian intellectual culture was admittedly inadequate by today's

standards, owing both to the scarcity of available material and to hermeneutic foibles of his own, but similar charges could be made against practically any of his contemporaries. What cannot be denied is that he was the first major European philosopher to accord to Indian thought genuine respect.[3] His archenemy Hegel did take considerable pains to acquaint himself with India too, but Hegel's teleological view of historical progress as moving inexorably from East to West lead him to adopt a condescending attitude to non-Western civilizations and to insist fatefully that philosophy proper begins with Greece.[4] In stark contrast to Hegel, Schopenhauer "saw history as a 'farce', a product of blind cosmic will, without direction or purpose," and this, according to J. J. Clarke, "enabled him to view Oriental philosophy not as a juvenile antecedent to the mature adulthood of Western Christendom but as a universal wisdom which was perennially alive and relevant" (Clarke 68).[5] He showed, in the words of Wilhelm Halbfass, "an unprecedented readiness to integrate Indian ideas into his own European thinking and self-understanding, and to utilize them for the illustration, articulation and clarification of his own teachings and problems" (Halbfass 120). As a result—and because of his own cultural prominence—he is a major figure in the history of Indian thought's transmission to the West.

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[3] Seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophers in Europe, such as Voltaire and especially Leibniz, had previously been much impressed by Chinese thought. See Clarke 37-53.

[4] See Robert Bernasconi's "Philosophy's Paradoxical Parochialism: The Reinvention of Philosophy as Greek" and Martin Bernal's controversial *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization.* Ironically Hegel has generally been held in higher esteem than Schopenhauer in India.

[5] Though Schopenhauer tended think ahistorically, at times he "also viewed India in accordance with the Romantic speculations, as the land of the most ancient and most pristine wisdom, the place from which Europeans could trace their descent and the tradition by which they had been influenced in so many decisive ways, and yet behind which they had also fallen" (Halbfass 112).

The role that Schopenhauer played in transmitting certain ideas about Buddhism to Nietzsche is the subject of this chapter, which is divided into four further sections. In the following section, I will briefly touch on the question of the extent to which Schopenhauer is indebted to Indian philosophy. In the third, I will consider the influence of Schopenhauer on Nietzsche insofar as it is relevant to Nietzsche's later attitude to Buddhism. The fourth section comprises an examination of some of the differences between Schopenhauer's thought and Buddhist philosophy. And in the fifth and final section, I will draw attention to Nietzsche's tendency to overlook these differences, and to conflate Buddhism with Schopenhauerian pessimism as a result.

2. Schopenhauer's Debt to Indian Philosophy

Schopenhauer's role as a transmitter of Indian thought notwithstanding, he tends to underestimate the extent of India's impact on his own philosophizing, and perhaps partly for this reason some of his commentators do the same. Bryan Magee, for instance, argues that although Schopenhauer was "genuinely well versed in Eastern thought" the nature of his relationship to it has been misunderstood:

> What happened is that, working entirely within the central tradition of Western philosophy—before all else continuing and completing, as he believed, the work of Kant—he arrived at positions which he then almost immediately discovered were similar to some of the doctrines central to Hinduism and Buddhism. The discovery came to him as a revelation, and throughout his subsequent writings he

> made play with the parallels. But the relationship is not one of influence. Indeed, in his mind the most important point lay in the fact that there was no influence: the profoundest thinkers of East and West, working unknown to each other in virtually unrelated traditions and languages—evolved quite separately over huge stretches of time, indeed in different historical epochs and completely different kinds of society—had been led to the same fundamental conclusions about the nature of the world. (*Schopenhauer* 15)

It is tempting when doing comparative philosophy to make hasty inferences to truth on the basis of congruous conclusions incongruously arrived at, but here especially circumspection is called for. Indian and European philosophers could have arrived independently at the same mistaken results. Two wrongs don't make a right in this case either, and cultural invariance is no guarantee of profundity or insight. There is tantalizing evidence of historical contacts between Indian and Greek philosophers that might account for some surprising similarities,[6] but perhaps even where there is no direct influence the traditions and languages in question are not as unrelated as they seem. So Nietzsche notes in a perceptive passage in which he argues for a version of linguistic determinism, or what came to be known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis:

> The strange family resemblance of all Indian, Greek, and German philosophizing is explained easily enough. Where there is affinity of languages, it cannot fail, owing to the common philosophy of grammar—I mean, owing to the unconscious domination and guidance by similar grammatical functions—that everything is prepared at the outset for a similar development and sequence of philosophical systems; just as the way seems barred against certain other

[6] See Bronkhorst, *Why is there Philosophy in India?* and Kuzminski, "Pyrrhonism and the Mādhyamaka."

> possibilities of world-interpretation. It is highly probable that philosophers within the domain of the Ural-Altaic languages (where the concept of the subject is least developed) look otherwise "into the world," and will be found on paths of thought different from those of the Indo-Germanic peoples and the Muslims: the spell of certain grammatical functions is ultimately also the spell of *physiological* valuations and racial conditions. (BGE 20)[7]

Nietzsche's conjecture has proved to be prescient, and many scholars now argue, as Chakravarthi Ram-Prasad puts it, that "the great distinction is actually between Chinese and 'Indo-European' philosophical cultures," rather than between Western philosophy and an ill-conceived category of "Asian philosophy" that often functions as an Orientalist projection of an irrational other. In short "it is only a romantic illusion that there is some common, mystical 'wisdom tradition' that bound [Indian and Chinese] cultures together and differentiated them from the West" (Ram-Prasad 8)—an illusion from which Schopenhauer was not completely free. In the chapter on Sinology from *On the Will in Nature* for example, he mistakenly describes the concept of *dao* in the *Daodejing* as "the way…to salvation, i.e., to redemption from the world and its misery," and maintains that Daoism "completely harmonizes with Buddhism both in meaning and in spirit" (*Two Essays* 360 – 361), apparently unaware of the fact that unlike Buddhism, Daoism does not concern itself centrally with suffering or natural evil and that the Daoist

[7] The view that language is not merely "the dress of thought"—as Samuel Johnson put it in the eighteenth century, expressing a conceit that dates back to antiquity—but its very *fabric,* and that a language is a manifestation of the unique *Volksgeist*, or national spirit, of the people who speak it is associated with the German romantic reaction to Enlightenment universalism around the turn of the nineteenth century, and in particular with the philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt. Nietzsche's espousal of the view in this passage is one of many examples of the way that Romanticism—despite his disavowal of it—influenced him profoundly.

ideal is not transcendence of nature, but attunement with and immersion in it. Nietzsche, with Schopenhauer firmly in mind, further develops his linguistic-physiological critique of the epistemic implications of philosophical commonality in a memorable attack in *Twilight of the Idols* on the *Weltschmerz* of the wise and the judgment that life is "no good":

> Formerly one would have said (—oh, it has been said, and loud enough, and especially by our pessimists): "At least something of all this must be true! The consensus of the sages evidences the truth." Shall we still talk like that today? *May* we? "At least something must be *sick* here," *we* retort.…The consensus of the sages…proves least of all that they were right in what they agreed on: it shows rather that they themselves, these wisest men, agreed in some *physiological* respect, and hence adopted the same negative attitude to life—*had* to adopt it. (TI 1.1-2)

But aside from the question of the plausibility of Nietzsche's reduction of philosophy to symptomology, the Indian influence on Schopenhauer, to say it again, may have been greater than Magee allows. Schopenhauer himself might have underplayed it both in order to stress the independent provenance of his own ideas, and—as Magee suggests—to corroborate them by appeal to their Indian antecedents. The "Oriental renaissance" in Germany was ushered in by central figures from the Romantic movement such as Johann Gottfried Herder, F. W. J. Schelling, and Friedrich Schlegel. In the winter of 1813 – 14 Friedrich Majer—an Orientalist and a disciple of Herder—introduced Schopenhauer to the *Oupnekhat*, a Latin translation of a Persian translation of the

Sanskrit *Upaniṣads* by the French Orientalist Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron. Schopenhauer could not praise the book highly enough, as this passage from *Parerga and Paralipomena* (published years later in 1851) clearly shows:

> [H]ow thoroughly redolent of the holy spirit of the *Vedas* is the *Oupnekhat*! How deeply stirred is he who, by diligent and careful reading, is now conversant with the Persian-Latin rendering of this incomparable book! How imbued is every line with firm, definite, and harmonious significance! From every page we come across profound, original, and sublime thoughts, whilst a lofty and sacred earnestness pervades the whole. Here everything breathes the air of India and radiates an existence that is original and akin to nature. And oh, how the mind is here cleansed and purified of all Jewish superstition that was early implanted in it, and of all philosophy that slavishly serves this! With the exception of the original text, it is the most profitable and sublime reading that is possible in the world; it has been the consolation of my life and will be that of my death. (2: 396)

Despite this high praise, he writes in 1818 in the preface to the first edition of *The World as Will and Representation* that if it didn't sound "too conceited" he might assert that "each of the individual and disconnected utterances that make up the *Upanishads* could be derived as a consequence [of his thought] although conversely [his] thought is by no means to be found in the *Upanishads*" (1: xiv-xv). Two years earlier though he penned the following unpublished remark: "I confess that I do not believe my doctrine could have come about before the Upanishads, Plato and Kant could cast their rays simultaneously into the mind of one man" (*Manuscript Remains* 1: 467). In brief, it seems that he suffered from some ambivalence regarding his debt to Vedic philosophy.

The question of what Schopenhauer owes to Buddhism is less vexed. In volume two of *The World as Will and Representation* he declares: "If I wished to take the results of my philosophy as the standard of truth, I should have to concede to Buddhism pre-eminence over the others," writing of his pleasure at seeing how this religion "with far more followers than any other" comes so close to his own views. "And this agreement must be yet the more pleasing to me," he continues, "inasmuch as in my philosophizing I have certainly not been under its influence. For up till 1818, when my work appeared, there were to be found in Europe only a very few accounts of Buddhism, and those extremely incomplete and inadequate" (2: 169). Schopenhauer's claim about the chronology of European Buddhist scholarship is correct: owing partly to Buddhism's disappearance from its country of origin, materials relating to it were in scant supply relative to texts from the Vedic traditions, and it was not until the latter half of the nineteenth century that Buddhist studies caught up with Hindu studies in Europe. Eugène Burnouf's seminal *Introduction à l'histoire du bouddhisme indien*, for example, did not appear until 1844. So the basic ideas of Schopenhauer's system were indeed developed independently of Buddhism, which he only used subsequently to support them.

"Time and again [Schopenhauer] interpreted Buddhist concepts as precise analogies of his own teachings," writes Halbfass. His "basic position was: 'in general, the sages of all times have always said the same.' Making explicit reference to his own thought, he stated that 'Buddha, Eckhardt, and I all teach essentially the same'" (111). Schopenhauer sees his own philosophy as expressing with unprecedented clarity the essence of ideas previously conveyed only mythologically or at best confusedly in

religious form. His hermeneutic insensitivity to historical and cultural conditions and his corresponding belief in a kind of *philosophia perennis* lead him to gloss over disparities between different worldviews and lump them together as so many manifestations of a shared underlying pessimism:

> [T]he true spirit and kernel of Christianity, as of Brahmanism and Buddhism also, is the knowledge of the vanity of all earthly happiness, complete contempt for it, and the turning away to an existence of quite a different, indeed an opposite, kind. This, I say, is the spirit and purpose of Christianity, the true "humour of the matter"; but it is not, as [the Hegelians] imagine, monotheism. Therefore, atheistic Buddhism is much more closely akin to Christianity than are optimistic Judaism and its variety, Islam. (*World* 2: 444)

Ironically, Nietzsche, whose dramatic about-face from Schopenhauerian apostle to apostate is well-known, and who insisted hyperbolically in *Ecce Homo* that Schopenhauer "went wrong everywhere" did not keep in mind that he may have gone wrong here too. He never fully rejected his mentor's pessimistic perennialism, and tended to tar dissimilar philosophies and religions with the same disapproving brush, which goes at least some way towards explaining his animus against Buddhism as a religion of decadence. It is to the issue of the long shadow that Schopenhauer's thought cast on Nietzsche's that we now turn.

3. Nietzsche's Reception of Schopenhauer

In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche claimed that "whatever marks an epoch in [his life] came [his] way by accident, never through someone's recommendation"[8] (2.3). His coming across *The World as Will and Representation* in a second-hand bookstore in Leipzig in October 1865 was an instance of such serendipity, as he later related in 1867:

> I took it in my hand and as something totally unfamiliar and turned the pages. I do not know which demon was whispering to me: 'Take this book home.' In any case, it happened, contrary to my principle of never buying a book too hastily. Back at the house I threw myself into the corner of the sofa with my new treasure, and began to let that dynamic, dismal genius work on my mind. Each line cried out with renunciation, negation, resignation. I was looking into a mirror that reflected the world, life and my own mind with hideous magnificence. (qtd. in Hayman 72)

In *Schopenhauer as Educator,* Nietzsche describes the "state of need, distress, and desire" that he found himself in when he encountered Schopenhauer: "I imagined I would find a true philosopher as educator, one who would elevate me above my inadequacies, to the extent that they were products of the age, and would teach me once again to be *simple*

[8] While in some respects Nietzsche was charitable in acknowledging his forebears, this characteristic aside in *Ecce Homo*—a work in which he says that he lives "on [his] own credit" (Preface 1)—is evidence, I think, of the anxiety of influence that he repressed in insisting towards the end of his sane life on his absolute independence, uniqueness and originality. See Adrian Del Caro, "Dionysian Classicism, or Nietzsche's Appropriation of an Aesthetic Norm" for further examples of Nietzsche's tendency to obscure his literary sources.

and *honest* in thought as in life."[9] These epochal inadequacies from which he suffered included "a certain gloom and apathy...an eternal discontent [and] a restless lack of confidence" brought on in part by a vacillation between "an intimidated or hypocritical Christian morality and an equally cowardly and inhibited turn to antiquity" (SE 2). Several months before his discovery of Schopenhauer, during the first year of his theological studies at Bonn, he had gotten into an argument with his mother over his refusal to take communion at Easter. In such a state of spiritual upheaval, his exposure to Schopenhauer was momentous:

> I am among those readers of Schopenhauer who after having read the first page know with certainty that they will read every page and pay attention to every word he ever uttered. My faith in him appeared immediately, and today it is just as complete as it was nine years ago. To express it in a comprehensible, if yet immodest and foolish manner: I understood him as though he had written expressly for me. (SE 2)

That many of Nietzsche's readers in turn might recognize something of their own reaction to him in his seemingly artless description of his response to Schopenhauer would probably have delighted him. Indeed, it is tempting to think that in addressing his readers as intimately as he does here and elsewhere—partly to compensate for the lack of actual intimacy in his personal life perhaps—this is exactly the effect that he is aiming at. It is tempting too to think that his account of his conversion from Christianity to

[9] *"Simplex sigillum veri"* (simplicity is the seal of truth) was a favorite motto of Schopenhauer's. It derives from the saying of the Dutch physician Hermann Boerhaave that Nietzsche pokes fun at in *Twilight of the Idols:* "'All truth is simple.' Is that not doubly a lie?" (1.4).

Schopenhauer is not as artless as it seems, but is—like all of Nietzsche's work—thoroughly literary or intertextual. The 1867 passage seems to be modeled, whether consciously or not, on Augustine's account in the *Confessions* of *his* conversion from Manichaeism to Christianity, with Nietzsche's whispering demon standing in for the unseen but overheard child whose repeated words *tolle lege, tolle lege* [Pick up and read, pick up and read] prompted the despairing Augustine to open the Bible and to read the first passage on which his eyes lit. Augustine remembered how Saint Anthony before him had accidently overheard a gospel reading, and had taken its admonition to follow Christ as having been addressed directly to him, and sure enough, the verses from *Romans* denouncing lust that Augustine happened on struck him too with all the force of revelation (152 – 153; bk. 8, ch. 12); just as Nietzsche in 1874 recalls that Schopenhauer's words affected him as though they had been written especially for himself.

But if Nietzsche took to Schopenhauer with all the zeal of a convert (Janaway 16 – 17), there were signs of dissent before too long, despite his insistence in the passage above that his faith in Schopenhauer was still unwavering nine years after making his acquaintance. Even though the general tenor of *The Birth of Tragedy* is Schopenhauerian, its specific theses are often not. In the 1886 preface he writes that he "tried laboriously to express by means of Schopenhauerian and Kantian formulas strange and new valuations which were basically at odds with Kant's and Schopenhauer's spirit and taste" (BT Self-Criticism 6). In particular, whereas Schopenhauer argues that the function of tragedy is to encourage a denial of the will to life, Nietzsche in *The Birth of*

Tragedy urges that it is the opposite: affirmation even of suffering. There is some dispute on this question, with Walter Kaufmann, for example, accepting Nietzsche's retrospective self-evaluation and Julian Young arguing that even if we were to treat Nietzsche's auto-criticism as reliable—which he thinks we should not—the balance of evidence would favor interpreting the author of *The Birth of Tragedy* as a Schopenhauerian pessimist (Young 26 – 30).

On the subject of *Schopenhauer as Educator* however, there is less controversy. When Nietzsche asserts in 1886 that already at the time of writing it in 1874 he "believed in nothing any more, as the people puts it, not even in Schopenhauer" (HAH 2 Preface 1), few scholars take issue with his claim: the essay is famous for having so little to do with Schopenhauer's actual metaphysical doctrines, which he had in fact already subjected to a penetrating critique in "On Schopenhauer," an unfinished composition written six years earlier in 1868.[10] But in that composition he writes that although Schopenhauer's "attempt to explain the world" fails, "no thought remains further from [him] than to attack Schopenhauer himself" and in any event the "errors of great men are worth honoring because they are more fruitful than the truths of small men"[11] (NR 24 – 25).

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10 An English translation of this composition is included in *The Nietzsche Reader*.

11 Significantly, this fine aphorism, by means of which Nietzsche expresses due deference to his mentor while taking issue with his views, echoes the quotation from Voltaire that Schopenhauer employs as the epigraph to the critical appendix on Kant's philosophy in volume 1 of *The World as Will and Representation: "C'est le privilège du vrai génie, et surtout du génie qui ouvre une carrière, de faire impunément de grandes fautes"* ["It is the privilege of true genius, and especially the genius who opens up a new path, to make great mistakes with impunity"] (*World* 1: 413). Ironically, when Nietzsche definitively declared his independence from Schopenhauer (and Wagner) with *Human, All Too Human*, he dedicated the first edition of the book "To Voltaire's memory, in commemoration of the day of his death, 30 May 1788." Parenthetically, in chapter 9 of *Ulysses*, "Scylla and Charybdis," Joyce has Stephen Dedalus retort to John Eglinton's suggestion that Shakespeare made a mistake in marrying Anne Hathaway with a related rejoinder that would have delighted Nietzsche: "A man of genius makes no mistakes. His

And it is Schopenhauer's personal traits that Nietzsche concentrates on in the 1874 essay, such as "his honesty, his cheerfulness [*sic*], and his steadfastness" (SE 2). Nietzsche admired what he saw as Schopenhauer's character and his courage, and identified with his failure to win the acclaim that he deserved. He never ceased to respect "his sense for hard facts, his good will for clarity and reason" (GS 99), and his "unconditional and honest atheism" (GS 347). And Nietzsche's own perspectivism and voluntarism are views deeply indebted to Schopenhauer's "immortal doctrine" of "the instrumental character of the intellect" (GS 99).

Nietzsche parts company with his mentor however on ontological and axiological affairs. "It is said of Schopenhauer, and with justice," he writes in *Daybreak*, "that after they had been neglected for so long, he again took seriously the sufferings of mankind" (52), but in Nietzsche's view he failed to take seriously the customary antidotes to these sufferings, or in other words, to treat them with the contempt that they deserved. Schopenhauer's pessimism and his ethic of compassion lead directly to the nihilistic view that "[n]othing is worth anything, life is not worth anything" (TI 9.35). And his "metaphysical need"—a need that Schopenhauer saw as the origin of religions, but that Nietzsche saw rather as a "late offshoot" of otherworldly religiosity[12] (GS 151)—only got

errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery" (182). In *Ulysses Annotated* Gifford and Seidman cite the *Lesser Hippias* as a possible source (206). Socrates remarks in that dialogue that Odysseus lies knowingly, and goes on to consider the apparent implication that the good man errs voluntarily. But Joyce may have had "the earthsbest schoppinhour" (*Finnegans Wake* 414) and the Voltaire quotation in mind too.

[12] GS 151. Nietzsche's claim in this section that "what first led to the positing of 'another world' in primeval times was not some impulse or need but an *error* in the interpretation of certain natural events, a failure of the intellect" is seriously open to question. A strong sense of alienation from the natural world may indeed be a peculiar feature of certain varieties of Abrahamic religion, but the trauma of loss is universal. To speak plainly, it is hard to fathom, whatever one's "beliefs," the absence of loved ones whose presence was formerly so vividly real; and even in traditions of primarily immanent spirituality—such as

him tangled up in "mystical embarrassments and subterfuges in those places where the factual thinker allowed himself to be seduced and corrupted by the vain urge to be the unriddler of the world" (GS 99).

Nietzsche's hostility to Schopenhauer became more and more pronounced throughout the 1880's, culminating in his claim in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* that Schopenhauer and Wagner are his "antipodes" (NCW 5). In *Ecce Homo* he even declares that the sympathetic portrait of Schopenhauer in the essay devoted to him was merely the result of projection. It is Nietzsche's own "innermost history" that forms its subject, and it is "not 'Schopenhauer as Educator' that speaks [there], but his opposite, 'Nietzsche as Educator," speaking only of Nietzsche himself (EH UO 3). In a remarkably condensed passage, Janaway notes how "tightly integrated" around his antagonism to Schopenhauer Nietzsche's later thought truly is:

> Schopenhauer: 'The value of art is its removing us from the realm of willing, desiring, attaining, and suffering'; anti-Schopenhauer: 'No, the value of art is as a great self-affirmation of the will to life, as a stimulus to life, an arouser of the will.' Schopenhauer: 'Beyond the veil of empirical particularities lies a realm of timeless realities'; anti-Schopenhauer: 'There is no beyond, there is merely this

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Chinese and Native American religion for example—"the memory of the dead" and the devotion to ancestors tend to give rise to some vague sense of an order of being beyond the purely physical. In addition there is the obvious role played by anxiety about one's own mortality. The *ubi sunt* sensibility expressed in Villon's *"Ballade des dames du temps jadis,"* and its famous refrain *"Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?"* is certainly not uniquely Christian. In a word, it seems likely that other worlds are posited not merely on the basis of an intellectual mistake, but because doing so answers to deep psychic and emotional needs. Of course, the old adage that the appetite grows with eating probably applies to these needs as to others, but since old age, sickness, death and loss are universal features of the human condition—not "social constructs" or cultural products—surely the natural direction of explanation runs from the "metaphysical need"—broadly construed—to religiousness, rather than the other way round.

> world and it is the instinct towards self-slander that prompts us to project a beyond.' Schopenhauer: 'That the world has no moral significance is a pernicious perversity of the mind, personified in religion as the antichrist'; anti-Schopenhauer: 'The world has no moral significance, there are merely moral interpretations of the world; so let us affirm this "antichrist".' Schopenhauer: 'Value lies in pity, because in feeling-with another I glimpse the illusoriness of individuality'; anti-Schopenhauer: 'Pity is a temptation to be resisted, a self-gratification which diminishes the pitying individual's strength and demeans the pitied.' Schopenhauer: 'Only through the denial of the will-to-life can this pain-ridden existence be redeemed'; anti-Schopenhauer: 'Only through the affirmation of life with all its pain can strength and greatness be achieved.' Schopenhauer: 'It would be better if I had not existed, if there were no world'; anti-Schopenhauer: 'I love and will everything that has happened and wish its recurrence endlessly.' (25-6)

At one point in *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche responds humorously to an unsympathetic review of his work. "[E]very sentence...was, with a consistency I admired, some truth stood on its head," he writes; "one really had to do no more than "revalue all values" in order to hit the nail of the head about me in a truly remarkable manner—instead of hitting my head with a nail" (EH 3.1). It is almost as if he arrived at his own mature philosophy by standing Schopenhauer's "truths" on their head in this way. In *The Genealogy* he writes that "we should not underestimate the fact that Schopenhauer...*needed* enemies in order to keep in good spirits; that he loved bilious black-green words, that he scolded for the sake of scolding, out of passion; that he would have become ill, become a pessimist (for he was not one, however much he desired it), if deprived of his enemies" (GM III 7), and once again, as in *Schopenhauer as Educator,* Nietzsche could just as easily be

describing himself here, for Nietzsche too required opponents to spur him on, as numerous passages from his work make clear.

For example, he explicitly expresses his "profound appreciation of the value of having enemies" (TI 5.3) and takes the spiritualization of hostility to be an element of master morality. It is not always possible though—in his own case at least—to distinguish that "divine malice" without which he says he "cannot imagine perfection" (EH 2.4) from the all too human malevolence that fuels much of slave morality; which morality, as he points out, "in order to exist...always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction" (GM 1.10). It is fair to say that Nietzsche was uncomfortably aware that there was a good deal of the slave in him as well as of the master ("I know both, I am both" (EH 1.1)), that too much of his own "action" was "fundamentally reaction," and that the polemic was a genre for which he had a disconcerting aptitude. "I do not want to wage war against what is ugly," he writes. "I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse" (GS 276), knowing as he does the danger that those who fight monsters may themselves become monstrous in the process (BGE 146). The high cost of struggling to free oneself from those aspects of one's cultural inheritance that one does not endorse—one of the major themes of *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life*—is beautifully highlighted by Joyce in *Ulysses* via the semi-autobiographical and sternly atheistic character of Stephen Dedalus, self-described with "grim displeasure" as a "horrible example of free thought," and famously trying to awake from the nightmare of history (20; ch. 1). Buck Mulligan—who on the contrary is

insouciantly and irrepressibly *irreligious* rather than *anti-religious*—censures Stephen for his dour and humorless intransigence: "you have the cursed jesuit strain in you," he tells him, "only it's injected the wrong way" (8; ch. 1).

In *Composing the Soul* Graham Parkes notes of Nietzsche that the influence of Emerson on his development "has been largely ignored or underestimated," and rightly claims that the "less theistic and anthropocentric work" of Emerson's protégé Thoreau "would no doubt have held an even greater appeal for Nietzsche, had he had access to it" since "the parallels between the two—in style of life as well as writing style and imagery—are quite remarkable" (37). Indeed, these parallels extend well beyond style to fundamental matters of character, as is shown by the following excerpt from Emerson's eulogy of Thoreau. Like much else that Emerson writes about Thoreau in the essay, his depiction of him here as antagonistic—or at least agonistic—by nature is uncannily applicable to Nietzsche:

> There was somewhat military in his nature not to be subdued, always manly and able, but rarely tender, as if he did not feel himself except in opposition. He wanted a fallacy to expose, a blunder to pillory, I may say required a little sense of victory, a roll of the drum, to call his powers into full exercise. It cost him nothing to say No; indeed he found it much easier than to say Yes. It seemed as if his first instinct on hearing a proposition was to controvert it, so impatient was he of the limitations of our daily thought. This habit, of course, is a little chilling to the social affections; and though the companion would in the end acquit him of any malice or untruth, yet it mars conversation. Hence, no equal companion stood in affectionate relations with one so pure and guileless. "I love Henry,"

> said one of his friends, "but I cannot like him; and as for taking his arm, I should as soon think of taking the arm of an elm-tree." (576; "Thoreau")

Nietzsche's pugnacious manner of writing and his project of the revaluation of values leaves him vulnerable to the charge that Heidegger brings against him of being caught up in the essence of what he wishes to oppose: of fighting fire with fire, in effect. But even if one agrees with Heidegger that "the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement" (*Pathmarks* 250), one need not agree that the reversal of a Schopenhauerian claim is still Schopenhauerian; the mature Nietzsche just might have been a metaphysician, but he was surely not a Schopenhauerian. And yet, an anti-Schopenhauerian philosopher such as Nietzsche became is clearly different from a non-Schopenahuerian, and the thoughts of two thinkers who are diametrically opposed still revolve around the same center. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche differ less on the fundamental question of what life is like than they do on the corollary issue of what attitudinal and actional responses are appropriate, given that life is as it is. In short, many of the differences between them, as Kathleen Higgins argues, are less a matter of theory than of temperament.[13] And oddly enough, to say it again, one question on which they did not differ greatly was that of the closeness of Schopenhauer's philosophy to Buddhism.

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[13] See her "Schopenhauer and Nietzsche: Temperament and Temporality." HAH 29—"Drunk with the odour of blossoms"—suggests that Nietzsche himself would have agreed with this reading: "Anyone who unveiled to us the nature of the world would produce for all of us the most unpleasant disappointment. It is not the world as thing in itself, it is the world as idea (as error) that is so full of significance, profound, marvellous, and bearing in its womb all happiness and unhappiness. This consequence leads to a philosophy of *logical world-denial:* which can, however, be united with a practical world-affirmation just as easily as with its opposite."

4. Differences between Schopenhauer and Buddhism

Unlike Schopenhauer (and Wagner), Nietzsche does not attempt "to understand Christianity as a seed of Buddhism that has been carried far away by the wind" (GS 99), but rather emphasizes its Jewish roots, partly as a rebuke to Christian anti-Semites. And in the *Antichrist* he takes pains to distinguish Buddhism from Christianity, though at one point he describes Jesus as appearing like "a Buddha on soil that is not at all Indian" (31). Nevertheless, in grouping Christianity and Buddhism together as nihilistic religions, he is implicitly following Schopenhauer. In Nietzsche's defense it can be said that he is certainly not alone in doing so: Western scholars tended for a long time to accept Schopenhauer's own account of the relation of his thought to Buddhism. As late as 1968, in his study *The Buddhist Nirvāṇa and its Western Interpreters*, Guy Welbon claims that Schopenhauer's thought "is in absolute accord with the Buddhist outlook," as least as far as "its constant ethical and soteriological drive" is concerned (161). But Indian thinkers have never been comfortable with the equation of pessimism and Buddhism. Radhakrishnan for example writes that the philosophy of Schopenhauer and Hartmann "is sometimes said to be 'little more than Buddhism vulgarized,'" and claims rather that "the dynamic conception of reality" found in Buddhism "is a splendid prophecy of the creative evolutionism of Bergson" (*Indian Philosophy* 1: 342). More recent Western commentators have also begun to dispute the view that Schopenhauer's philosophy and Buddhism "breathe the same atmosphere" as Peter Abelsen puts it. "Schopenhauer often put emphasis on Buddhism's pessimistic outlook on earthly existence, but compared to

his world view, which is very severe, Buddhism seems almost cheerful," he writes, adding that "it lacks the sheer disgust of life [*sic*] that is characteristic of his doctrine" (255).

Perhaps one of the main reasons for Schopenhauer's antipathy to life was his view of the unalterability of character and his corresponding belief that human beings exist at the mercy of the metaphysical will. He famously analyzes the sexual drive, for example, as showing the way in which the individual is merely a means by which the species perpetuates itself. His own ill will towards the will—as Nietzsche pointed out—may derive from a deeply rooted sense of being a plaything of forces over which he has no control. But Buddhism does not in general subscribe to this kind of pessimistic fatalism.

Tṛṣṇā, or craving, the eighth link in the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, is certainly a critically important concept in Buddhism, as it is described in the second noble truth as the cause of the arising of suffering; but it is a psychological, not a metaphysical, term, and it would be a mistake to identify the term *tṛṣṇā* with Schopenhauer's term will, which he employs to refer to the inner nature of reality. Liberation in Buddhism is not exactly a matter of self-denial, or of the will's turning against itself as Schopenhauer would put it; it is more like an existential realization of the way things are that results in a dramatic attitudinal shift. *Avidyā*, or ignorance of the workings of karma and so on, "is for Buddhists the root evil" according to Edward Conze (39). The relative precedence of craving and ignorance in bringing about suffering in Buddhism is a matter of some dispute, but cognitive as opposed to volitional factors seem to play a greater role here according to Buddhism, while the reverse seems to be true on

Schopenhauer's view. Erich Frauwallner suggests that in early Buddhism craving was prioritized, but that subsequently ignorance came to the fore, whereas Rupert Gethin argues that neither should be accorded primacy, but that *tṛṣṇā* and *avidyā* should be understood as referring to the mutually reinforcing affective and cognitive aspects of the mental states that result in *duḥkha* (Williams 46). "Either way," Paul Williams observes, "ignorance is not a first cause in Buddhism in the sense of something that chronologically started the whole process off":

> It is not that once there was nothing and then ignorance occurred and the world came about. The traditional Buddhist view is that...there is no chronological (or indeed ontologically necessary) first cause. Rather, ignorance is the conceptual, and, we might say, soteriological first cause. It is that which is taken to act as a conceptually final explanation for suffering and the cycle of rebirth, the root of saṃsāra. It is that from which liberation follows when it is completely overcome. In stating ignorance to be the root cause of suffering Buddhism…displays its credentials as an Indian gnostic system. If ignorance is the cause of saṃsāra, knowing, gnosis (*vidyā = jñāna*), becomes the ultimate condition of nirvāṇa. (46-7)

It is important to stress that *avidyā* in Buddhism is not just privative. There is more to *avidyā* than mere *lack* of knowledge or having no view; rather *avidyā* is something like the holding of false views, which is why Matilal contends in his article "Ignorance or Misconception?" that "misconception" might be a better translation if "ignorance" were not so well established. It is also important to distinguish between the Buddhist account of *avidyā*, and the accounts given by various Hindu philosophical

schools, especially that of Advaita Vedanta. Advaitins use the term *maya*, or illusion, to refer to the deceptive nature of *brahman*, or reality. It is by means of *maya* that *brahman*, which is one and unchanging, appears to the unenlightened as multiple and mutable. *Avidyā* then is ignorance of this unitary, permanent, transcendent reality that underlies the illusory phenomenal world, but since Buddhists reject the idea of *brahman*, they give a different account of *avidyā*. Thomas Kasulis explains how "Buddhism disagrees fundamentally with the Hindu viewpoint" on this issue:

> In Buddhism, the issue to be addressed is not illusion, but delusion. According to Buddhism, we experience the unreal not because the real presents a false appearance, but because we project our own desires onto what is presented. In that projection we delude ourselves. The goal of Buddhism, therefore, is not to see through the appearances, but instead to accept them without the distortion of egocentric projections. The phenomenal world is not illusion (*maya*), but "suchness" or "thusness" (*tathata*). ("The Buddhist Concept of Self" 403)[14]

Thus *avidyā* in Buddhism is to an extent a kind of wishful thinking or wrongheadedness, a *willful ignorance* to acknowledge what we would prefer to disregard. "Error (faith in the ideal) is not blindness," in Nietzsche's terms; "error is cowardice" (EH Preface 3). In short, our beliefs and desires form a complex; our likes and dislikes influence our outlook and vice versa. And we change our desires not through sheer

[14] Significantly, this difference is less pronounced in some non-dual Mahāyāna schools, in which one might say that *māyā* is more like the "self-deception of reality." (At the risk of sounding facetious, it could be pointed out that *all differences* are by definition less pronounced in non-dualism…) Śaṅkara—as is well-known—is often accused of being a "crypto-Buddhist." The converse accusation against Mahāyānists of crypto-Hinduism is less common, but perhaps no less justified.

determination or strength of will, but by subjecting them along with their supporting beliefs to a dispassionate analysis in the ongoing practice of mindfulness and meditation. Subject to the foregoing qualifications about the interdependence of cognitive and affective factors, Abelsen is right to highlight the intellectual dimension of Buddhism by contrast with Schopenhauer's voluntarism. "In every form of Buddhism," he claims, "suffering is regarded primarily as a matter of ignorance; correspondingly, salvation is always linked to insight." Schopenhauer however sees the intellect as a mere instrument of the will: insight into the causes of suffering may allow the potential renunciant to recognize the futility of self-assertion; but it avails little in overcoming self-assertive tendencies. Indeed, "the more of a philosophical understanding of reality we gained," if Schopenhauer is right, "the more we would realize that it was a case beyond human aid," says Abelsen (273).

Schopenhauer, as does the Buddha, advocates an ethic of compassion, but his voluntarism—his metaphysics of the will—involves him in a kind of uncompromising moralistic worldview that is very unlike the Buddha's and anathema to Nietzsche, who declares in *Beyond Good and Evil* that his project is "to think pessimism through to its depths and to liberate it from the half-Christian, half-German narrowness and simplicity" that bedevils it "in the form of Schopenhauer's philosophy" (BGE 56). Schopenhauer's drastic solution to the problem of undeserved suffering is simply to insist that the lack of desert is merely apparent. The man who knows the will as the in-itself of every phenomenon understands the "eternal justice" manifested in suffering, and if the eyes of a tormented person were opened he "would see that all the wickedness that is or ever was

perpetrated in the world proceeds from that will which constitutes also *his* own inner being, and appears also in *him*," he writes. "He would see that, through this phenomenon and its affirmation, he has taken upon himself all the sufferings resulting from such a will, and rightly endures them so long as he is this will" (*World* 1: 354). Schopenhauer goes on to quote Calderon approvingly to the effect that the greatest offense is to have been born, and to endorse the Christian myth of original sin. This view of existence as kind of fair and fitting cosmic retribution is one that he urges repeatedly:

> Far from bearing the character of a *gift*, human existence has entirely the character of a contracted *debt*…Accordingly, if man is regarded as a being whose existence is a punishment and an atonement, then he is already seen in a more correct light…If we wish to measure the degree of guilt with which our existence itself is burdened, let us look at the suffering connected with it. Every great pain, whether bodily or mental, states what we deserve; for it could not have come to us if we did not deserve it. (*World* 2: 580)

Nietzsche seizes on the last sentence of the above passage in *Twilight of the Idols* as a damning example of "a principle in which morality appears as what it really is—as the very poisoner and slanderer of life" (TI 6.6). But Schopenhauer takes this principle, that "man rightly remains abandoned to physical and mental sufferings," to be the real meaning of the dogma of original sin, and to lie at the heart of Buddhism too. "The innermost kernel and spirit of Christianity is identical with that of Brahmanism and Buddhism," he writes; "they all teach a heavy guilt of the human race through its existence itself" (*World* 2: 603 – 4). Considering Nietzsche's attempt as a self-

proclaimed immoralist to restore the "innocence of becoming" by ridding the world of the concepts of punishment and guilt (TI 6.7 – 8), it is not surprising that he should oppose Buddhism to the extent that he accepts Schopenhauer's characterization as accurate. Indeed, in the passage from *Beyond Good and Evil* quoted above he claims to have looked "with an Asiatic and supra-Asiatic eye…into the most world-denying of all possible ways of thinking" and to have emerged "beyond good and evil and no longer, like the Buddha and Schopenhauer, under the spell and delusion of morality," with his gaze now set on the opposite supremely life-affirming ideal; the idea of eternal recurrence (BGE 56). Later, probably as a result of rereading Paul Deussen and Herman Oldenberg, he revises his view of Buddhism, and in the *Genealogy* he allows that like him, it too stands beyond good and evil (GM 3.17). He repeats this observation in *The Antichrist* in an excursus in which he expresses the hope that his "condemnation of Christianity has not involved [him] in any injustice to a related religion with an even larger number of adherents" (AC 20), but it is arguable that by persisting in representing Buddhism as nihilistic, he is indeed treating it unfairly.

5. Nihilism and Buddhism

It is the questionable belief that "a desire for nothingness" is the real thrust behind the Buddhist venture that fuels much of Nietzsche's resistance to it, and this belief seems to be largely based on a rather superficial construal of Schopenhauer's views on the relation between nirvana and nothing—views that underwent more change than is

generally allowed. The metaphysical details may be problematic, but the general drift of the emphatic peroration of the first volume of *The World as Will and Representation* is clear enough. The denial of the will results in the annihilation of the phenomenal world for the will-denying subject: "If…we have recognized the inner nature of the world as will, and have seen in all its phenomena only the objectivity of the will…we shall by no means evade the consequence that, with the free denial, the surrender, of the will, all those phenomena also are now abolished….No will: no representation, no world." We resist this conclusion, but this resistance, Schopenhauer insists, is merely confirmation of our unregeneracy: "Before us there is certainly left only nothing; but that which struggles against this flowing away into nothing, namely our nature, is indeed just the will-to-live which we ourselves are, just as it is our world. That we abhor nothingness so much is simply another way of saying that we will life so much, and that we are nothing but this will and know nothing but it alone." Finally, he argues that we must overcome the anxiety that this nothingness evokes in us, rather than resorting to euphemism:

> [W]e have to banish the dark impression of that nothingness, which as the final goal hovers behind all virtue and holiness, and which we fear as children fear darkness. We must not even evade it, as the Indians do, with myths and meaningless words, such as redemption in *Brahman*, or the *Nirvana* of the Buddhists. On the contrary, we freely acknowledge that what remains after the complete abolition of the will is, for all who are still full of the will, assuredly nothing. But also conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is—nothing. (*World* 1: 410 – 11)

In *Schopenhauer as Educator* Nietzsche consoles himself with a distorted conception of nirvana as a kind of defeatist petrification in quoting a passage from *Parerga and Paralipomena* on the fate of the unacknowledged hero who "finds himself turned to stone…his will, mortified throughout his entire life by toil and trouble, lack of success, and the ingratitude of the world…extinguished in Nirvana" (SE 4). The familiar grumbling about lack of recognition make it clear that this passage has less to do with Buddhist philosophy than Schopenhauer's fantasies. Elsewhere, Schopenhauer memorably describes death as "the great opportunity no longer to be I," and nirvana as the reward of the person with a genuine death-wish:

> Dying is the moment of that liberation from the one-sidedness of an individuality which does not constitute the innermost kernel of our true being, but is rather to be thought of as a kind of aberration thereof….As a rule, the death of every good person is peaceful and gentle; but to die willingly, to die gladly, to die cheerfully, is the prerogative of the resigned, of him who gives up and denies the will-to-live. For he alone wishes to die *actually* and not merely *apparently*, and consequently needs and desires no continuance of his person. He willingly gives up the existence that we know; what comes to him instead of it is in our eyes *nothing*, because our existence in reference to that one is *nothing*. The Buddhist faith calls that existence *Nirvana*, that is to say, extinction. (*World* 2: 507 – 8)

Many of Nietzsche's more extreme diatribes against "morality" are perfectly understandable in the context of such passages. "Morality, as it has been so far understood—as it has in the end been formulated once more by Schopenhauer, as "negation of the will to life"—is the very *instinct of decadence,* which makes an

imperative of itself," he declares. "It says: '*Perish!*' It is a condemnation pronounced by the condemned" (TI 5.5). In 1874, Nietzsche can still write enthusiastically of the "vision of life" that might inspire such a death-wish, Schopenhauer's glimpse of "a horrible, supraworldly scene of judgment in which all of life, even the highest and most perfected life, was weighed in the balances and found wanting [by] the saint as the judge of existence" (SE 7), but by 1886, although certain "the world is *not* worth what we thought it was," he has completely lost his patience with this axiological conceit:

> We are far from claiming that the world is worth *less;* indeed it would seem laughable to us today if man were to insist on inventing values that were supposed to *excel* the value of the actual world. This is precisely what we have turned our backs on as an extravagant aberration of human vanity and unreason that for a long time was not recognized as such. It found its final expression in modern pessimism, and a more ancient and stronger expression in the teaching of the Buddha…The whole pose of "man *against* the world," of man as a "world-negating" principle, of man as the measure of the value of things, as judge of the world who in the end places existence itself upon his scales and finds it wanting—the monstrous insipidity of this pose has finally come home to us and we are sick of it. (GS 346)

Once more Buddhism is seen as anticipating Schopenhauerian pessimism, and associated—via the repeated allusion to Daniel 5:27[15]—with Christianity. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he complements Christianity and Buddhism on "their [venerable] art of teaching even the lowliest how to place themselves through piety in an illusory higher

[15] "[Y]ou have been weighed on the scales and found wanting."

order of things" (61); a peculiar complement to pay to Buddhism at any rate. He notes that any "purely moral value system (that of Buddhism, for example) ends in nihilism" (WP 19), and again that in morality "the will to nothingness has the upper hand over the will to life—and the overall aim is, in Christian, Buddhist, Schopenhauerian terms: 'better *not* to be than to be'" (WP 685). Nietzsche does indicate in the section of *Schopenhauer as Educator* quoted above that the "vision of life" in question was such that everything that Schopenhauer "later acquired from life and books, as well as from all the fields of scholarship, provided him with little more than the means and the color with which to express it," and that "Buddhistic and Christian mythology" sometimes "served him primarily as an extraordinary rhetorical instrument by means of which he believed he was able to express that vision more clearly" (SE 7). He knows, in other words, that Schopenhauer's account of Buddhism cannot be accepted uncritically, but he tends—especially where nirvana is concerned—to forget or overlook this vital interpretive issue.

Schopenhauer's claim that what remains over after the denial of the will is "nothing" and that "nirvana" is just another name for this nothing needs to be treated with some caution. For it is only nothing "in our eyes," in the eyes of those "who are still full of the will." It is only nothing, in other words, from a particular point of view, and "conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is—nothing." Schopenhauer ends *The World as Will and Representation* with an elegant play on words: nothing, of course, can mean "not anything" or something of no value or importance. What is left after the negation of the will may be of no interest to the willful, but it is a relative as opposed to an absolute

nothing, for "considered more closely, an absolute nothing, a really proper *nihil negativum,* is not even conceivable" according to Schopenhauer (*World* 1: 409). But in concluding as he does with a literary flourish, Schopenhauer glosses over an acute difficulty that his metaphysics faces.

If—as he repeatedly asserts—the will is the actual Kantian thing-in-itself, then its abolition would result not merely in a relative, but rather in an absolute nothing. Moira Nicholls argues that there were more significant developments in Schopenhauer's thought after the first edition of *The World as Will and Representation* than most scholars allow, and presents a convincing case for the hypothesis that "as Schopenhauer became increasingly aware of the epistemological differences between his philosophy and Buddhist teaching, he shifted his views to accord more readily with what he understood of theirs" (195 – 96). The confusion surrounding the issue of the status of the will can plausibly be traced to his reluctance to relinquish the view of the will as the thing in itself, for he considered this unique contribution of his own to be a great advance over Kant, and without it, his metaphysics is in danger of losing its distinctness from Kant's. Nevertheless, as Nicholls writes, there are "passages in his later works in which he seems to withdraw the claim that in self-consciousness we are aware of the will as thing-in-itself, suggesting instead that in self-consciousness we are aware of no more than our phenomenal willings" (172). He writes, for example that "even the inward observation we have of our own will still does not by any means furnish an exhaustive and adequate knowledge of the thing-in-itself.…In the first place, such knowledge is tied to the form of the representation; it is perception or observation, and as such falls apart into subject and

object" (*World* 2: 196 – 97). And again, in a letter written in 1852, he explains that his philosophy is immanent, not transcendent: "It teaches what appearance is, and what the thing in itself is. But this is thing in itself only in a relative sense, i.e., in its relation to appearances…but I have never said what the thing in itself is apart from that relation, since I do not know it; but in it, it is the will to life" (qtd. in Halbfass 117).[16]

Whether the notion of a relative thing in itself is conceptually incoherent or merely terminologically unfortunate is a nice point of Schopenhauerian interpretation that will not be pursued here; Nicholls writes that on this view the will "becomes the esoteric but non-noumenal essence of the world" (186). The important thing for present purposes is that the fact that the will is not the absolute means that Schopenhauer can insist that "Nirvana is just a relative nothing" (*Parerga* 2: 101). But in as much as nirvana, as he understands it, is a state in which all duality is lacking, including the duality between subject and object that is a necessary condition of knowledge, nothing positive can be said of this state:

> We lack concepts for what the will now is; indeed, we lack all data for such concepts. We can only describe it as that which is free to be or not to be the will-to-live. For the latter case, Buddhism describes it by the word *Nirvana*…It is the point that remains forever inaccessible to all human knowledge precisely as such. (*World* 2: 560)

16 Julian Young in his *Willing and Unwilling* also presents a reading of Schopenhauer in which he emphasizes Schopenhauer's disavowal of an identification of his concept of the will with the Kantian thing in itself.

In this respect, Schopenhauer gives what is actually a perfectly acceptable and insightful explanation of the relation between *saṃsāra* and nirvana, and the Buddha's silence on the nature of the latter:

> But the Buddhists with complete frankness describe the matter only negatively as *Nirvana*, which is the negation of this world or of *Samsara*. If *Nirvana* is defined as nothing, this means only that *Samsara* contains no single element that could serve to define or construct *Nirvana*. (*World* 2: 608)

But Nietzsche is not impressed by these dialectical subtleties. In his later work, he officially eschews metaphysics, but to the extent that he is at all prepared to think in such terms, he tends towards—or flirts with—the view that the world as it is in itself is will, specifically will to power, and so the abolition of the will would result, contra Schopenhauer's claim, in nothingness pure and simple. So Nietzsche's identification of nirvana and nothingness, though initially inspired by Schopenhauer, is actually less nuanced than Schopenhauer's. Again and again, with depressing monotony, he writes of "the *nothing*, the Indian Circe" (CW 4), and the "Buddhistic negation of the will" (BT 7). In the preface to *The Gay Science* he contrasts the "[withdrawal] from pain into that Oriental Nothing—called Nirvana," with the courage of "the American Indian who, however tortured, repays his torturer with the malice of his tongue" (3). From *The Birth of Tragedy* to *The Case of Wagner*, he despises the "desire of the Buddhist for nothingness" (GM 1.7) and characterizes Buddhism as a form of "weary…passive nihilism, a sign of weaknes" (WP 23), as "weary…passive nihilism" and as a "sign of

weakness." In *The Antichrist* he berates the supposedly disingenuous rhetoric whereby "of course, one does not say 'nothingness' but 'beyond' or 'God,' or '*true* life' or Nirvana, salvation, blessedness" (AC 7) in a virtual paraphrase of the closing lines of volume I of *The World as Will and Representation.* This nihilistic conception of nirvana was also at work in Richard Wagner's thought and music, and as a result the pervasive influence that he had over Nietzsche further colors the latter's attitude to Buddhism. It is to the effect of Wagner's personality and his art on Nietzsche's thinking that we turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 2

Wagner

1. Introduction

The nature of Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner is a good deal more complex and ambiguous than that of his relationship to Schopenhauer. While he began his career as a follower of Schopenhauer, and is clearly indebted to him even in opposition, the mature Nietzsche is anything but a Schopenhauerian. It is arguable however that he remained a reluctant Wagnerian to the end. Naturally, Wagner, whom Nietzsche once called "the fullest human being I have ever known" (SL 209), meant more to him than Schopenhauer could ever have done. In a life not blessed with close personal relationships, Wagner, for several formative years, was a hero, a mentor, and a best friend. Just over a month after he first met Wagner, Nietzsche wrote to the *maestro* as follows: "I know of only one other man, your great spiritual brother Arthur Schopenhauer, whom I regard with equal reverence, even *religione quadam* [in a kind of religious manner]" (SL 53). This remark cannot be written off as mere flattery or the expression of initial enthusiasm: comparably immoderate praise of Wagner is to be found repeatedly in Nietzsche's writings from the early 1870's. It is not going too far to say that at the beginning of their relationship at least Nietzsche was simply in awe of Wagner.

He speaks of the composer in words that sound like those of somebody who is falling in love. He wrote a long and breathless letter to his friend Erwin Rohde on November 9, 1868 describing his first meeting with Wagner: "During these days my mood was like something in a novel; believe me, the preliminaries to this acquaintance, considering how unapproachable this eccentric man is, verged on the realm of fairy tale" (SL 37). This language of enchantment recurs again and again in association with Wagner—and not merely with respect to his art. Thus writing again to Rohde over a year later in January 1870, he tells him of his Christmas vacation at Wagner's villa in Tribschen and insists that it is "most necessary that [Rohde] should be initiated into this magic" (SL 61). "Doesn't it almost seem like magic to be able to encounter such a phenomenon in the present day?" he asks of Richard Wagner in Bayreuth in his essay of that name (RWB 4). And although his considered estimation of the worth of Wagner's art underwent a radical reversal, the spell that Wagner cast never wore off. In November 1888, he writes to his mother of a "most remarkable coincidence." He was about to ask her to copy out a sentence from a letter that Wagner wrote to him when he received a letter from her containing that very sentence. "For a moment, my mind boggled," he writes, presaging much worse to come soon. "It's like a happening in a fairy tale!" (SL 320). The Wagnerian aura survived the composer's death, and even extended to his widow, with whom Nietzsche may well have been in love. As he writes to Jakob Burckhardt on January 6, 1889 a few days after his mental breakdown: "The *rest* is for Frau Cosima…Ariadne…From time to time we practice magic…" (SL 348).

The relationship between Nietzsche and Wagner was extremely unequal: Joachim Köhler audaciously frames it as a series of "lessons in subjugation" (*Nietzsche and Wagner*). The two met towards the end of Wagner's creative career, when the latter had already produced most of the masterpieces on which his reputation depends, and so was little influenced by the then unknown professor of philology. Furthermore, Wagner's outward life, in stark contrast to Nietzsche's, was a full and rich one, with many friendships and associations with the great and the good of the European art world and high society. But although Nietzsche was a relative nonentity, Wagner did have great affection and even respect for him, and he was treated for several years as part of the Wagner's unconventional domestic circle at Tribschen. "Strictly speaking, you are the only benefit apart from my wife that life has brought my way," Wagner wrote him in 1872 (qtd. in Safranski 136). An inveterate flatterer and manipulator like Wagner was more than capable of writing in this vein to anybody from whom he thought he could extract some advantage; his letters to King Ludwig of Bavaria, to take just one instance, make for embarrassing reading. But there are independent reasons to think that in Nietzsche's case, he may have actually meant what he said. While Nietzsche was constantly irritated by Wagner's lack of circumspection as a thinker, the latter—if he was unaware of the extent of Nietzsche's genius—must at least have recognized his erudition and intelligence, and have appreciated both his enthusiasm for his own music, and his esteem for Schopenhauer, which Wagner shared. There are also several passages in Cosima Wagner's *Diaries* which contain highly laudatory remarks about Nietzsche that Wagner made in private. And while Cosima Wagner wrote with one eye on posterity, the

remarks seem genuine enough. On January 5, 1871, for example, during a discussion of a draft of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Wagner says to his wife of Nietzsche: "He is the only living person, apart from Constantin Frantz, who has provided me with something, a positive enrichment of my outlook" (86).

But Nietzsche had other things to do than to promote Wagner's cause, and Wagner's imperiousness began to cripple his intellectual development. Wagner wanted an amanuensis; Nietzsche needed independence. He could not play the role of a hack or a henchman, since he knew that he had projects of his own to attend to. The decisive break came in 1876, when Nietzsche fled the first Bayreuth festival in great distress, but as early as 1871 we find the following entry in Cosima Wagner's *Diaries*: "it is as if [Nietzsche] were trying to resist the overwhelming effect of Wagner's personality" (111); and it is clear that the attempted resistance was never fully successful.

Thomas Mann notes insightfully that "Nietzsche's immortal critique of Wagner…is a panegyric in reverse, another form of eulogy" (100). Reading Nietzsche's numerous diatribes against Wagner is definitely a strange experience. His feelings about him are irresolvably ambivalent; he cannot come to a decision. Even at his most vitriolic, he praises Wagner with vivid condemnation. His attempts to rid himself of Wagner are like trying to wash off blood with blood.

"If you hate a person, you hate something in him that is part of yourself," wrote Hermann Hesse in *Demain*. "What isn't part of ourselves doesn't disturb us" (97). There is an almost nightmarish atmosphere to Nietzsche's encounters with Wagner. It is as though he looms in every corner, behind every door. Just when Nietzsche imagines he's escaped

from his clutches, he feels him breathing over his shoulder. He runs away until he can't run any farther, and Wagner is there already, waiting with a smile. He admits to Peter Gast that he is frightened to realize "*how* closely [he is] *akin* to Wagner" (SL 190). Or as he puts it more concisely in *Ecce Homo:* "Schopenhauer and Wagner, *or*, in one word, Nietzsche" (UO 1).

One reason that Nietzsche feels so close to Wagner is that both men represent in their own persons a fascinating compound of sickness and health: a compound in the chemical sense, as opposed to a mere mixture. Wagner's art, while it might be enervating, represents a huge creative effort. It required enormous energy just to bring it into being, and thus paradoxically, by its very existence, is a jubilant assertion of virtuosity, and an affirmation of the human condition:

> Wagner was an artiste himself, just like the tenors and virtuosos who called him "maestro": in other words, a man who was genuinely amusing and desirous of amusing others; an organizer of entertainments and celebrations of life—in profound and very healthy contrast to the man of perception and knowledge who sits in judgement, the man of absolute earnest, like Nietzsche. (119)

Thus writes Thomas Mann in his essay on Nietzsche and Wagner. He hits the nail on the head, I believe, when he speaks of Wagner's "healthy brand of sickness" (128). And although Nietzsche vigorous prose scintillates with energy and life, one might even speak reciprocally of his sickly brand of health.

It is clear that in a way Nietzsche was simply not able for Wagner; he was affected too deeply by him. "My Wagner mania certainly cost me dear," he writes his sister, declining to attend the second Bayreuth festival in 1882. "Has not this nerve-shattering music ruined my health? And the disillusionment and leaving Wagner—was not that putting my very life in danger. Have I not needed almost six years to recover from that pain?" (SL 180). And if his Wagner mania cost him dearly, his estrangement from Wagner, which he seems to have sustained through pure will power, cost him almost as much. "I…even think Wagner's death brought me the greatest relief I could have had," he wrote to Peter Gast a year later on February 19, 1883, less than a week after Wagner had died in Venice. "It was hard to be for six years the opponent of a man whom one has admired above all others, and I am not built coarsely enough for *that*" (SL 208). And he was simply not able for Wagner's music either, and the extreme physical effect it had on him:

> My objections to the music of Wagner are physiological objections: why should I trouble to dress them up in aesthetic formulas?...I no longer breathe easily when this music begins to affect me...my foot soon resents it and rebels...But does not my stomach protest too? My heart? My circulation? Are not my entrails saddened? Do I not suddenly become hoarse? To listen to Wagner I need pastilles Gérandel. (NCW 2)

"A man like me, *profoundment triste*, cannot endure Wagnernian music in the long run," he wrote to Erwin Rhode in 1886. "We need the south, sunshine 'at any price,' bright, harmless, innocent Mozartian happiness and delicacy of tones" (SL 251).

In *The Case of Wagner* Nietzsche lavishes praise on Bizet at Wagner's expense, but in a letter to Carl Fuchs, he advises him not to take that praise too seriously, since its purpose is to serve as an "ironical antithesis." "[T]he way I am, "he admits, "Bizet does not matter to me at all" (SL 340). He enjoys Bizet's music as a diversion, but it does not matter to him, because there is nothing in it that he feels compelled to contend against. "Bizet makes me fertile," he writes in *The Case of Wagner*. "Whatever is good makes me fertile. I have no other gratitude, nor do I have any other *proof* for what is good" (CW 1). But if this "proof by fertility"—as opposed to the proof by blessedness that he ridicules in *The Antichrist* 50 and elsewhere—is a criterion of merit, then surely Wagner's music is supremely good, judging solely by the sheer number of words that it continually goads Nietzsche into writing! Three and a half of his books are devoted to Wagner, and there is hardly one in which he doesn't feature in some form. Nietzsche quite simply cannot have done with him. As if the two postscripts and an epilogue included in *The Case of Wagner* were not enough, he returns to his favorite subject again later in 1888 in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, and yet again repeatedly in section after section of *Ecce Homo*.

In "Pessimism and the Tragic View of Life: Reconsiderations of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*" Ivan Soll attempts to show that "Nietzsche's repeated rejection of Schopenhauer's pessimism masks its substantial similarity to his own," arguing that he largely "accepted and utilized Schopenhauerian arguments in constructing just those positions by means of which he defined himself as diametrically opposed to

Schopenhauer." Soll believes that Nietzsche's misrepresentation of Schopenhauer's influence is a consequence of his animus against Wagner and his association of the two:

> Nietzsche's tendency to disown Schopenhauer completely, rather than to delineate with more sensitivity and detail the extent and limits of their affinity and agreement, was in part due to Wagner's enthusiasm for Schopenhauer. Because Nietzsche was in the painful and difficult throes of working his way free of Wagner, he brought to his critical evaluation and reevaluation of Schopenhauer the same stance of hyperbolic and somewhat monolithic repudiation that he had needed to escape Wagner's oppressive domination. (105 – 106)

"It is my hypothesis," he writes, "that Nietzsche treated Schopenhauer in a manner he had developed to deal with the threat Wagner had posed to his personal autonomy" (106). My own hypothesis here is that, despite the comparative sympathy with which he treats it, something similar applies to his position on Buddhism too. Schopenhauer had already soured him on Buddhism, and Wagner made things even worse. The case for such a conclusion can only be circumstantial at best, but I believe that a careful consideration of the biographical and textual evidence shows that the complex that he had involving his mentors and Buddhism precluded a nonbiased appraisal of the religion on his part.

In the rest of this chapter I want to examine some issues raised by three of Wagner's most important works, and the way Nietzsche responds to them, with a view to bringing some of this evidence to light. In the upcoming section, I argue that Wagner's erotic transformation of the concept of nirvana in *Tristan and Isolde* into a Romantic death wish misleads Nietzsche into thinking of the pursuit of nirvana in Buddhism as motivated by a comparable self-destructive drive. The subsequent section deals with Nietzsche's reading of *The Ring* and his disappointment with what he perceived to be "Buddhistic" (BW 649) changes that Wagner made to the original, more life-affirming version of the libretto. And in the final section I draw on Roger Hollinrake's reading of book four of *Zarathustra* as a parody of *Parsifal* in a bid to show that to the extent that Nietzsche sees *Parsifal* as exemplifying a kind of "Buddhism for Europeans" (GM Preface 5), his hostility towards its idealization of a sentimental susceptibility to suffering gets directed at Buddhism too.

2. *Tristan and Isolde*

Tristan und Isolde meant more to Nietzsche than any other work by Wagner. "From the moment when there was a piano score of *Tristan*"—i.e. from 1861, when he was sixteen years old—"I was a Wagnerian," he writes (EH 2.6). Some idea of the extreme effect that *Tristan* must have had on him can be gotten if one recalls his argument in *The Birth of Tragedy*, where he claims that the Apollonian libretto of a Wagner music drama protects the listener against the full force of the Dionysian music by distancing him or her from "the

innermost abyss" of things that speaks through the orchestra. The experience of the music itself, without the interposition of the tragic myth, would be a literally fatal "ontophany." "Thou canst not see my face," God tells Moses in Exodus 33:20, "for there shall no man see me, and live," and just as a complete revelation of the glory of God would supposedly overpower the faculties of a mere mortal, so too would an unmediated encounter with a Wagnerian composition! This at least is what Nietzsche seems to suggest when he wonders in one of *The Birth of Tragedy's* more "embarrassing, image-mad and image-confused" passages (BT Self-Criticism 3) whether one "can imagine a human being who would be able to perceive the third act of *Tristan and Isolde*, without any aid of word and image, purely as a tremendous symphonic movement, without expiring in a spasmodic unharnessing of all the wings of the soul" (21). Apparently he really meant it when he wrote to Wagner that he regarded him with quasi-religious reverence (SL 53). It is difficult to think of another passage in all of criticism in which an artist is so extravagantly praised.

Of course, Nietzsche soon outgrew the views that he espouses in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and in his post-metaphysical incarnation does not attribute to art the ability to afford us any such numinous or noumenal glimpses into some trans-phenomenal "true world." But despite his best efforts to wean himself from a Wagnerian musical diet, *Tristan and Isolde* continues to affect him in ways that he can only describe in the language of magic and religion:

> [T]o this day I am still looking for a work that equals the dangerous fascination and the gruesome and sweet infinity of *Tristan*—and look in all

> the arts in vain. All the strangenesses of Leonardo da Vinci emerge from their spell at the first note of *Tristan*. This work is emphatically Wagner's *non plus ultra;* with the *Meistersinger* and the *Ring* he recuperated from it….The world is poor for anyone who has never been sick enough for this "voluptuousness of hell": it is permitted, it is almost imperative, to employ a formula of the mystics at this point. (EH 2.6)

Nietzsche may have overestimated the influence of Schopenhauerian—and thus "Buddhistic"—philosophy on the *Ring*, but in *Tristan und Isolde* their influence is pronounced. Guy Welbon writes that while "no strict demonstration of its truth is possible, it is by no means preposterous to think of *Tristan* as a nirvāṇa symphony" (182). Or as a *mokṣa* symphony perhaps, slightly more accurately, since the idea of liberation that emerges from the work is in some respects—like Schopenhauer's philosophy—closer to Vedanta than to Buddhism. "The Welt-Atem, world breath, invoked in the final lines is evidently the âtman, breath or self, of the Upanishads," writes Roger Scruton. "Wagner would have been aware of the etymological link between German Atem and Sanskrit âtman, as he was aware of the philosophical idea that the concept of âtman is used to express" (215).

But "Wagner's 'night piece' in praise of love," writes Hartmut Reinhardt, though "conceived in the spirit of Schopenhauer's philosophy…reinterprets Schopenhauer in a dilettante yet bold fashion" (291); and the same could be said of it concerning Indian philosophy, to the extent it draws upon it. Whereas Schopenhauer argued that the only way that salvation can be attained is by the self-denial of the will to life, Wagner theorized that the same end might be brought about by the complete satiation of sexual desire:

> I have been slowly rereading friend Schopenhauer's principal work, and this time it has inspired me, quite extraordinarily, to expand and—in certain details—even to correct his system….It is a question, you see, of pointing out the path to salvation, which has not been recognized by any philosopher, and especially not by Sch., but which involves a total pacification of the will through love, and not through any abstract human love, but a love engendered on the basis of sexual love, i.e. the attraction between man and woman. (*Letters* 432)

Thus he writes to Mathilde Wesendonck on December 1, 1858. He even drafted a letter to Schopenhauer on the subject, which he neither completed, nor—wisely—sent. In "The Meyaphysics of Sexual Love" Schopenhauer considers the double-suicides of lovers "thwarted by external circumstances" to be something of an unsolved problem for his system. He writes that it is inexplicable "why those who are certain of mutual love and expect to find supreme bliss in its enjoyment, do not withdraw from every connexion by the most extreme steps, and endure every discomfort, rather than give up with their lives a happiness that for them is greater than any other they can conceive" (*World* 2: 532). "It flatters me to suppose that you really have not yet discovered any explanation of this," writes Wagner in the unsent letter to Schopenhauer, "as it tempts me to…submit to you a view whereby I think I can see in the beginnings of sexual love itself one path of salvation, to self-knowledge and self-denial of the Will" (*Wesendonck* 76 – 7). In *Tristan und Isolde* he develops this notion into a kind of "tantric-Schopenahuerian approach" as Welbon puts it (180). The originally ascetic idea of nirvana is eroticized into a kind of passionate

apotheosis of amatory morbidity, the artistic realization of which is Isolde's emotionally overwhelming *Liebestod* in the final scene of the opera:

> How they swell and
> Clamour around me,
> shall I breathe them,
> shall I hear them?
> Shall I taste them,
> dive beneath them?
> Breathe my last
> in sweet perfume?
> In the surging swell
> in the ringing sound,
> in the immensity of
> the world's breath
> drowning
> sinking
> unconscious
> highest bliss! (*Tristan* 189)

One is a very long way indeed at this stage in terms of attitude and affect from anything recognizably Buddhist. Isolde's highly-charged oceanic feeling of mystical unity recalls the act two duet in which she sings, in unison with Tristan, "I myself am the world" (*Tristan* 113), and her quasi-*Upaniṣadic* narcissism now gives way to oblivion as she finally expires upon Trsitan's corpse. Significantly, the liberated state of highest bliss is characterized in the *Liebestod* as unconscious, which is either incoherent, or else entails the radical thesis that *all* conscious states, properly understood, have an overall negative

hedonic quality. The Buddha, as is well-known, refused to be drawn on the phenomenology of nirvana, beyond identifying it as the cessation of suffering: a stance that perhaps inevitably lead to much philosophical speculation as to its nature. But in Nyāya—according to which consciousness is only a contingent property of the *ātman*—the peculiar doctrine is advanced that in *mokṣa* there is, strictly speaking, consciousness of neither pleasure nor pain, *nor indeed of anything else at all either*, since the liberated *ātman* is no longer a subject of experience, but is unconscious or insentient. Unsurprisingly other Indian philosophers, especially Vedantins, mock Naiyāyikas for holding such a view, which they feel is difficult to distinguish from materialism. Radhakrishnan dismisses this "state of painless, passionless existence" as "a mere parody of what man dreams to be" and, voicing a common objection, writes that "we may as well say that a stone is enjoying supreme felicity in a sound sleep without any disturbing dreams" (*Indian Philosophy* 2: 152). Apart from this parallel though, *Tristan und Isolde* has really nothing in common with Nyāya.

The most distinctive thing about *Tristan* as a work of art is its sheer voluptuousness and unrestrained eroticism, and in his brilliant essay "The Sorrows and Grandeur of Richard Wagner," Thomas Mann accuses Nietzsche of prudishness in his attitude towards it as a result:

> Nietzsche said that he would not touch the score of *Tristan* unless he was wearing gloves. 'Who dares to speak the word,' he exclaims, 'the *real* word to describe the *ardeurs* of the *Tristan* music?' The rather old-maidish tone of this question strikes me as much funnier now than it did at the age of 25. For what is

> there to 'dare'? Sensuality, unbounded, spiritualized sensuality, raised to a mystical order of magnitude and portrayed with the utmost naturalism, sensuality that will not be appeased by *any* gratification—this is the 'word' he means; and one wonders how it is that Nietzsche, that 'free, superlatively free spirit', has suddenly developed the rancour towards sexuality that is suggested in such a psychologically accusing manner by his question. (129-30)

Mann is surely right to raise the issue of sexuality, but I do not think he is entirely fair to Nietzsche in this passage, for it is possible that his rancor is not so much towards sensuality as such as it is towards that "horrible mixture of sensuality and cruelty" that he once called the real "witches' brew" (BT 2). In *The Birth of Tragedy* he allows that the element of cruelty is "redeemed" and "transfigured" in art, but by the time of writing *Beyond Good and Evil* he has become less confident:

> What constitutes the painful voluptuousness of tragedy is cruelty; what seems agreeable in so-called tragic pity, and at bottom in everything sublime, up to the highest and most delicate shudders of metaphysics, receives its sweetness solely from the admixture of cruelty. What…the Wagnerienne who "submits to" *Tristan and Isolde*, her will suspended [enjoys and seeks] to drink in with mysterious ardor are the spicy potions of the great Circe, "cruelty." (229)

It is even possible that the alleged appeal that Wagner's art holds for our sadistic instincts is less problematic for Nietzsche than its masochistic and ultimately self-destructive allure. In short, it may be the fact that *Tristan* represents the consummate artistic expression of Wagner's death-wish that is responsible for Nietzsche's objections to it. "Dear Franz!" writes Wagner to Liszt in 1854, "not a year of my life has passed recently without my

finding myself at least *once* on the very brink of a decision to end my life. Everything about it is so muddled and so hopeless!" (*Letters* 297). Similar outbursts recur *ad nauseam* in his letters over the course of decades: he writes repeatedly to Mathilde Wesendonck of his longing to die in her arms (416, 428), and signs a letter to King Ludwig just over seven months before his death "From one who gladly and fervently longs to die *soon*" (923). Wagner's spiritual hypochondria and self-pitying histrionics should of course be taken with a pinch of salt. Of nobody is Samuel Johnson's adage truer that "if a man *talks* of his misfortunes, there is something in them that is not disagreeable to him" (qtd. in Boswell 1088). But even allowing for Wagner's penchant for self-indulgent overstatement, it is clear that he had, in Michael Tanner words, "the strongest sense that life as it is ordinarily lived, and apart from any specific set of social or political conditions, is not worth the pains and efforts that are involved" (71). Or in his *own* words, again from a letter to Liszt: "With every passing day I fall into a deeper decline: the life I live is *indescribably worthless!* Of life's real enjoyment I know absolutely nothing: for me the 'enjoyment of life, of *love'* is merely something to be imagined, not experienced" (qtd. in Mann 115-6).

The deification of erotic love in *Tristan* serves as a thin disguise for this deep dissatisfaction with life, or so at least Nietzsche—not unreasonably—came to think. Take Wagner's own description of the lovers' condition in the prelude that he wrote to introduce the work: "one thing alone left living: desire, desire unquenchable, longing forever rebearing itself—a fevered craving; one sole redemption—death, surcease of being, the sleep that knows no waking!" (qtd. in Goldman and Sprinchorn 272 – 3). Or his retrospective characterization in a letter to King Ludwig: "In Tristan I had to portray

the all-consuming anguish of love's longing, inconceivably intensified to a pitch of the most painful desire for death" (*Letters* 885). And on discovering Schopenhauer, he wrote: "I have yet found a sedative which has finally helped me to sleep at night; it is the sincere and heartfelt yearning for death: total unconsciousness, complete annihilation, the end of all dreams—the only ultimate redemption!" (*Letters* 323).

Even Nietzsche admitted in *Beyond Good and Evil* that the "thought of suicide is a powerful comfort: it helps one through many a dreadful night" (157); but it is probably on account of his own struggles with *Weltschmerz* that he is so well-equipped to diagnose its effects in Wagner. Although in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* he claims that he initially misunderstood the meaning of Wagner's art, this misunderstanding is understandable given that Wagner, as Adorno observed, is the first composer "in whom ambiguity has been elevated to a principle of style" (33). One never knows where one *is* with Wagner music:

> Ambiguity itself becomes an element of expression. In Beethoven and well into high Romanticism the expressive values of harmony are fixed: dissonance stands for negation and suffering, consonance for fulfilment and the positve. In Wagner this is changed in the direction of a greater subjective differentiation of the emotional values of harmony….That suffering can be sweet, and that the poles of pleasure and pain are not rigidly opposed to one another, but are mediated, is something that both composers and audience learned uniquely from him, and it is this experience alone that made it possible for dissonance to extend its range over the whole language of music. And few aspects of Wagner's music have been as seductive as the enjoyment of pain. (67)

So Nietzsche, for whom the bittersweet inseparability of joy and sorrow is the first article of the Dionysian faith of life-affirmation, would have us believe that he misconstrued Wagner's art as an expression of this faith, whereas in reality it "negates" and "slanders" life, and is a product of despondency:

> Every art, every philosophy, may be considered a remedy and aid in the service of either growing or declining life: it always presupposes suffering and sufferers. But there are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from the *overfullness* of life and want a Dionysian art as well as a tragic insight and outlook on life—and then those who suffer from the *impoverishment* of life and demand of art and philosophy, calm, stillness, smooth seas, or, on the other hand, frenzy, convulsion, and anesthesia. (NCW 5)

There is ample biographical evidence for Nietzsche's claim that in Wagner it is "*hatred* against life" rather than "*excess* of life" that has become creative (NCW 5), and that Wagner experienced his creative drive as the symptom of a disease, even resorting to coldwater cures to become "a completely healthy person in body and senses" and so to free himself of it: "My secret wish was that the attainment of physical health would enable me to rid myself entirely of art, the bane and torment of my life; it was a last desperate bid for happiness, for true, pure enjoyment of life, such as only the consciously healthy man can know," he writes (qtd. in Mann 115). Nietzsche's thinking on the relation between life and art undergoes many subtle and bold transformations, and he frequently suggests that life without art would be unlivable. But even at his lowest ebb, art—whatever else it may be—is always "the great stimulus to life" (TI 9.24) and never

an escape from it, which it certainly can be for Wagner, as this letter to Theodor Uhlig shows:

> My dear friend! I am often now beset by strange thoughts about "art", and on the whole I cannot help feeling that, if we had *life*, we should have no need of *art*. Art begins at precisely the point where life breaks off: where nothing more is present, we call out in art, "I wish". I simply do not understand how a truly happy individual could ever hit upon the idea of producing "art": only in life can we "achieve" anything—is our art therefore not simply a confession of our impotence? (qtd. in Tanner 99)

Nietzsche's observation above that certain impoverished types lurch akratically between demands for the opposing extremes of tranquility and turbulence is also psychologically astute and eminently applicable to Wagner, who, writing of his having become aware of his "terrible" and "very real emptiness of heart," confesses to Liszt: "until [the age of 36] my nature was held in a state of balance between two conflicting elements of desire within me, one of which I sought to appease by means of my art, while periodically giving vent to the other by means of passionate, fantastical [and sensual] extravagances" (*Letters* 323).[17]

And other members of Wagner's inner circle—or should that be love triangles?—flirted with suicidal fantasies too. Cosima Wagner apparently attempted suicide when

[17] "You know my Tannhäuser, this idealization of a demeanour which in reality is often quite trivial!" Wagner adds parenthetically, in a rare moment of insightful self-analysis. To be fair to him, it must be admitted that it is the *way* that Wagner's art idealizes the trivial that makes all the difference, though Nietzsche would undoubtedly protest that some things are better left unidealized…

she was married to von Bülow, whose will to live—if one can take Wagner's word for it in this letter to Eliza Wille—was not always particularly strong either:

> Poor Bülow arrived at the beginning of July utterly exhausted, his nerves overwrought and shattered; he had cold, inclement weather the whole time he was here, and, as a result, had an insalubrious stay, which resulted in his succumbing to one illness after another. And, on top of everything, a tragic marriage; a young and quite unprecedentedly gifted wife, the very image of Liszt but intellectually superior to him,—[who, only a year after their marriage,—when the two of them were visiting me in Zurich for the second time,—tried to take her own life at her despair at having committing the error of marrying; since then she has made repeated, and conscious, attempts to contract various fatal illnesses, but has finally found the strength to persevere and suffer patiently as a result of her visionary tendency towards the sublime. Her husband, sensitive and sufficiently self-aware to see where he stands, curses *himself* for having chained this woman to him; he seeks to dull his pain by striving too hard in the execution of his art, indeed he is deliberately trying to ruin his health in order to forget and—to die.—This, then, is the cruel basis upon which qualities of the greatest kindness have been developed on both sides, revealing the most touching concern for each other's well-being which now binds them both together].[18] (*Letters* 621)

It is difficult to take such catalogues of melodramatic mishaps too seriously from a distance, and the lives of Wagner and his associates sometimes seem to be made up of little else. Nietzsche's contemptuous observation that all of "Wagner's heroines, without exception, as soon as they are stripped of their heroic skin, become almost indistinguishable from Madame Bovary" is worth bearing in mind here. "Indeed,

[18] Spencer and Millington note that the "passage in square brackets was suppressed from the published German text."

transposed into hugeness," he writes, "Wagner does not seem to have been interested in any problems except those which now preoccupy the little decadents of Paris. Always five steps from the hospital. All of them entirely modern, entirely *metropolitan* problems. Don't doubt it" (CW 9). Aspects of Nietzsche's attack on morality which, when taken out of context, may strike one as insensitive or even cruel—not to say simply *wrong*—make far more sense when considered against this backdrop of late Romantic excess and self-indulgence. "It seems to me," he writes in *The Gay Science* "that people always *exaggerate* when they speak of pain and misfortune, as if it were a requirement of good manners to exaggerate here" (326). The reference to good manners is critical, I think: it is a particular social class and milieu that he is satirizing. Notice too the "cruel basis" of the compassionate concern for each other that Hans and Cosima von Bülow have developed: precisely this overwrought wallowing in *self*-pity. In light of all this it is hardly any wonder that Nietzsche characterized Wagner's tantrum fraught life as one "which shouts at every one of us: 'Be a man and do not follow me—but yourself! But yourself!'" (GS 99). The words are an allusion to the epigraph to later editions of *The Sorrows of Young Werther,* which Goethe added in the hope of dissuading readers from emulating its Romantic hero's suicide.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that whereas Welbon suggests that *Tristan* might be thought of as a nirvana symphony, von Bülow actually composed an orchestral fantasy called *Nirwana,* which Wagner admired and which Spencer and Millington call a "critical, but previously overlooked influence on *Tristan*" (Wagner, *Letters* 165). But though he praised the piece overall, Wagner wrote von Bülow that there were dissonant

passages in the music that he could only reconcile himself to when he was "able to picture in [his] mind a feeling of suicidal madness" (*Letters* 322), and the composition was familiarly known as the "Suicide Fantasia"! Nietzsche heard it performed at a music festival at Meiningen in 1867 and though it "frightful" (SL 31), and to my ear too, I must admit, von Bülow's tone poem sounds decidedly more samsaric than nirvanic. But judgments of musical taste aside, the important point is that it represents yet another example of the Wagnerian Zeitgeist's—and thus arguably Nietzsche's—conflation of nirvana and suicide. *The Ring* cycle, of course, prominently features another suicidal heroine in Brünnhilde, and it is to this work, and *Götterdämmerung* in particular, that I want to turn next.

3. *The Ring*

In *The Case of Wagner* Nietzsche gives a well-known synopsis of the changes that the *Ring* underwent over the years, and stresses the alleged impact that Wagner's discovery of Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy had on the final version of the cycle. He notes that the *Ring* was originally intended to be a work of revolutionary optimism, inspired by the ideas of thinkers like Feuerbach, Proudhon and Bakunin, and associated beliefs in anarchism and free love. "For a long time, Wagner's ship followed this course gaily," he writes, but then disaster ensued: "The ship struck a reef; Wagner was stuck. The reef was Schopenhauer's philosophy; Wagner was stranded on a *contrary* world view." Ashamed of his "*infamous* optimism," Wagner "translated the *Ring* into

Schopenhauer's terms. Everything goes wrong, everything perishes, the new world is as bad as the old: the *nothing*, the Indian Circe beckons":

> Brunhilde was initially supposed to take her farewell with a song in honor of free love, putting off the world with the hope for a socialist utopia in which "all turns out well"—but now gets something else to do. She has to study Schopenhauer first; she has to transpose the fourth book of *The World as Will and Representation* into verse. *Wagner was redeemed*. (CW 4)

Nietzsche's sketch of the compositional history of *The Ring* makes for entertaining reading, but despite its "having been cited or referred to ad nauseam by his disciples and many of his commentators," Georges Liébert claims that this "petulant summary" is highly inexact:

> The original poem was completed in December 1852—and published the following February in an edition of fifty copies—two years before Wagner had read a line of Schopenhauer. And if afterward he hesitated over the conclusion he ought to give to his work, it remains that, after having struck out a few 'Feuerbachean' verses from Brunhilde's peroration, which were too 'sententious' for his taste (but which he did set to music for King Ludwig II), Wagner also set aside the version written in 1856 that was inspired by Schopenhauer….The twilight of the gods leads not to the end of the world, but of *a* world." (145)

Liébert is substantially right to take issue with Nietzsche's account. In a letter to Peter Gast written while he was working on *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche asks Gast if he can get hold of Wagner's collected writings, as he would "like to have a few

references, to be able to quote exactly." What he is after in the libretto of *The Ring* is "a variant of Brünnhilde's last aria that is entirely Buddhistic" (BW 649). The variant in question is usually referred to by scholars as the "Schopenhauer ending":

> Were I no more to fare
> to Valhalla's fortress,
> do you know whither I fare?
> I depart from the home of desire,
> I flee forever the home of delusion;
> the open gates
> of eternal becoming
> I close behind me now:
> to the holiest chosen land,
> free from desire and delusion,
> the goal of the world's migration,
> redeemed from reincarnation,
> the enlightened woman now goes.
> The blessed end
> of all things eternal,
> do you know how I attained it?
> Grieving love's
> profoundest suffering
> opened my eyes for me:
> I saw the world end.— (*Wagner's Ring* 363)

It almost appears as if, in his eagerness to condemn Wagner, Nietzsche loses sight of the fact that these "Buddhistic" lines were dropped from the final version, in which Wagner allowed the music to speak for itself. And to Kitcher and Schacht at any rate,

that music is not at all nihilistic. To our ears, they write, "the music with which [*Götterdämmerung*] ends, while perhaps paradigmatically exemplifying Schopenhauer's conception of music's expressive power, is as far from delivering a Schopenhauerian negative judgment upon life and the world as Wagner could have written":

> Wagner seems to us to have been unable to be true to his Schopenhauerian convictions there, as his musical genius combined with the spirit with which he had earlier imbued the *Ring's* text to sweep him and us toward a conclusion that we regard as resonating with something deeper and more profoundly insightful in his artistic soul than any such ways of thinking to which he may have been attracted and disposed to proclaim. It bespeaks a fundamental affirmation rather than negation of life—and of life rather than nirvana, notwithstanding life's tragic character even at its very best, and the suffering and destruction that are inseparable from it despite our best efforts and intentions. (Kitcher and Schacht 23 – 24)

It seems to me that Kitcher and Schacht are right about the *actual music* of *Götterdämmerung's* closing scene: it does sound more celebratory than sombre. The events of the scene however, and Brünnhilde's "suttee" most obviously, can hardly be interpreted as expressive of life-affirmation, and Wagner himself—albeit half-jokingly—represents her suicide as an exemplary act. "When my old friend Brünnhilde leaps into the funeral pyre, I shall plunge in after her, and hope to die a Christian! So be it! Amen!" he wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck in 1859 (*Letters* 460). Although one would have to make allowances for the fact that Wagner was working on *Tristan und Isolde* when he wrote that letter, even Kitcher and Schacht—despite their sense of the

affirmative character of the music—admit that with respect to the question of pessimism, *Götterdämmerung* is a "difficult case" (23). In any event, one can understand Nietzsche's disappointment that the original "Feuerbach ending" was never reinstated when one reads it—especially the final couplet—in light of aspects of his own philosophy that are considered below:

> I now bequeath to that world
> my most sacred wisdom's hoard.—
> Not wealth, not gold,
> nor godly pomp;
> not house, not garth,
> nor lordly splendour;
> not troubled treaties'
> treacherous bonds,
> not smooth-tongued custom's
> stern decree:
> blessed in joy and sorrow
> love alone can be.— (*Wagner's Ring* 362 – 3)

The final couplet of this Feuerbach ending—*selig in Lust und Leid / lässt—die Liebe nur sein!*—actually recalls Goethe rather than Feuerbach. To be specific, it recalls Klärchen's famous song from *Egmont*, which was set to music by Beethoven (among others):

> Gladdened
> And saddened

And troubled in vain,
Longing
And thronging
With wavering pain,
Raised up to heaven,
The deeper to fall,
Happy alone
Is whom love has in thrall. (*Early Verse Drama* 116)

Wagner, like every educated German, would have known this lyric by heart. Indeed, he quotes its opening words—*Leidvoll und Freudvoll*—in the letter to Mathilde Wesendonck cited above (*Letters* 456), to describe his state of mind during the composition of the last act of *Tristan*, which is another reason to think that he may have had *Egmont* in mind when writing Brünnhilde's peroration. It is tempting too to hear echoes of Klärchen's song in Lou Andreas-Salomé's "Prayer to Life," which she made a present of to Nietzsche, and which he set to music. In *Ecce Homo* he claims that the time will come when it will be sung in his memory, calling the poem an "amazing inspiration" and declaring that the last words "attain greatness" because pain in them "is not considered an objection to life" (EH Z.1):

That time itself might not outlive me!
Hold me in both your arms again:
If you have no more joy to give me
Well then—at least you still have pain.[19]

[19] Andreas-Salomé's "Prayer to Life" was apparently written before she met Nietzsche, though he "mistakenly assumed [it] to have been in his honor alone" (Andreas-Salomé liii); understandably enough

Nietzsche of course was also familiar with Goethe's lyric, and *he* alludes to it in section 12 of *The Gay Science* where he criticizes science's purported aim of giving people "as much pleasure and as little displeasure as possible." It seems that by science he means the kind of theoretical optimism typified by Socrates and by the nineteenth century's self-confident belief in progress. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he inveighs against this "unshakeable faith that thought, using the thread of causality, can penetrate the deepest abysses of being, and that thought is capable not only of knowing being but even of *correcting* it" (BT 15). Nietzsche's problem with such a view—and the associated "belief in the earthly happiness of all" (BT 18)—is that he believes that it unfits us for living life to the fullest. The theoretical person "no longer dares entrust himself to the terrible icy current of existence: he runs timidly up and down the bank. So thoroughly has he been pampered by his optimistic views that he no longer wants to have anything whole, with all of nature's cruelty attaching to it," he writes (BT 18):

> But what if pleasure and displeasure were so tied together that whoever *wanted* to have as much as possible of one *must* also have as much as possible of the other—that whoever wanted to learn to "jubilate up to the heavens" would also have to be prepared for "depression unto death"? [*dass, wer das „Himmelhoch-Jauchzen" lernen will, sich auch für das „zum-Tode-betrübt" bereit halten muss?*] And this is how things may well be. At least the Stoics believed that this was how things were… (GS 12)

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given its overall tone, which is remarkably redolent of his thought. Zarathustra's song (Z 4.119.12), for example, is similar to Andreas-Salomé's poem. (The translation of the final stanza above is my own. See Waithe 87 for the German original and a complete English translation.)

The Stoics may or may not have believed this—Nietzsche himself undoubtedly did, and his attacks on meliorism in all of its forms can only be understood in light of his "both or neither-ism." The verses from Goethe to which he alludes above—*Himmelhoch jauchzend, zum Tode betrübt*[20]—are proverbial in German as a description of temperamental Romantics. Goethe's marvelous use of the felicitous half-rhyme between *freudvoll* and *leidvoll* seems to me to be the probable inspiration behind Nietzsche's untranslatable coinage *Freudenschaften*, which he plays on in the chapter "On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions" in *Zarathustra* (1. 5), or in German, *Von den Freuden- und Leidenschaften*.[21] The German verb *leiden* means "to suffer" as in "to feel pain" and also "to undergo, or be acted on." To be "passionate" in English—despite the word's positive connotations in a contemporary culture which often celebrates strong feelings for their own sake—is also to be passive in this double sense. "These hinted meanings hint in turn at something deeper, a very old and very natural attitude toward the emotions," writes Lester Hunt. "This is the view that the passions are simply things that we undergo, that happen to us, as if they were the weather of the soul; its storms may be endured or escaped (as one can come in out of the rain) but they are not really things that we *do*." On this loosely Spinozistic view, the passions are hindrances to human flourishing, but for Nietzsche, as Hunt points out, they can become "instruments of freedom and power" (70):

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[20] These are the verses that are translated "Raised up to heaven, / The deeper to fall" above.

[21] This section is an elaboration of section 37 of *The Wanderer and his Shadow* in which Nietzsche urges us to "work honestly together on the task of transforming the passions [*Leidenschaften*] of mankind one and all into joys [*Freudenschaften*]."

> Once you suffered passions [*hattest du Leidenschaften*] and called them evil. But now you have only your virtues left: they grew out of your passions. You commended your highest goal to the heart of these passions: then they become your virtues and passion you enjoyed [*Freudenschaften*]. (Z 1.5)

Nietzsche further develops this line of thought about the sublimation of the passions a few chapters further into *Zarathustra* in "On the Tree on the Mountainside" (1.8). Zarathustra maintains that the conditions under which a human being flourishes are like those under which a tree does: "The more he aspires to the height and light, the more strongly do his roots strive earthward, downward, into the dark, the deep—into evil." (Notice how the imagery of simultaneous ascent and descent again recalls the lyric by Goethe.) A careful reading reveals that this chapter "On the Tree on the Mountainside" (1.8) is rather closely connected to the earlier one "On Enjoying and Suffering the Passions" (1.5). In 1.5, the passions are compared to "wild dogs in your cellar" that metamorphose into "birds and lovely singers." In 1.8 Zarathustra refers again to these wild dogs, and says that "they bark with joy in their cellar when your spirit plans to open all prisons."

Finally, while Michael Hamburger's rendering of Klärchen's song given above does an excellent job of preserving the music of the original, it is possible that there is an overtone in the German that resonated deeply with Nietzsche, but that does not survive translation into English. The opening line in the original runs *Freudvoll und leidvoll, gedankenvoll sein*. *Gedankenvoll* means pensive or preoccupied: literally full of thought

or *thoughtful*. But just as in English "thoughtful" recalls "thankful," so too in German, as Heidegger's beloved Pietist tag has it, *Denken ist Danken*: to think is to thank. It is not a giant step from this insight to Nietzsche's *amor fati*, his claim to that he could not "fail to be grateful to [his] whole life" in the preface to *Ecce Homo*; "grateful even to need and vacillating sickness" as he puts it in *Beyond Good and Evil* section 44, and in similar passages scattered throughout his work.

In the 1886 preface to *The Gay Science* he writes of "the gratitude of a convalescent" that "pours forth continually" in that book for "that time of severe sickness whose profits [he has] not yet exhausted" (1 – 3). Faced with "great…long, slow pain" he maintains, one can do either of two things:

> [We can] learn to pit our pride, our scorn, our will power against it, equaling the American Indian who, however tortured, repays his torturer with the malice of his tongue; or [we can] withdraw from pain into that Oriental Nothing—called Nirvana—into mute, rigid, deaf resignation, self-forgetting, self-extinction. (3)

Bearing in mind that for Nietzsche malice does not imply hatred, but can be a sign of health and of mischievous high spirits, and that "[e]ven love of life is still possible" (GS Preface 3) in the aftermath of very great pain, it is tempting to associate these two alternatives with the alternative endings of the *Ring*: the Feuerbach ending, characterized by defiance and love, and the "Buddhistic" ending characterized by a death wish. Nietzsche's language in the above passage—"that Oriental Nothing—called Nirvana"—is Schopenhauerian, but the fact that he reprinted sections 3 and 4 of the preface to *The Gay*

Science as the epilogue to *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* suggests that the passage above is relevant to his reading of Wagner too. And interestingly, in the lightly edited *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* version, he speaks only of "[withdrawal] from pain into that Nothing"; he no longer labels this (Wagnerian?) nothing as "Oriental" or identifies it with nirvana.

Can any conclusion be drawn from the above analysis of the influence of Goethe's little lyric *Klärchens Lied* on Nietzsche's thought? Nietzsche's idea that only those who are prepared to suffer most deeply are capable of experiencing the highest joy would seem to have been anticipated by Goethe's heroine. So could Nietzsche's whole philosophy of self-cultivation be derived from a short poem in which a teenager in love revels in her mood swings? Is that all there is to it? This *would* "seem odd," but that would not be entirely my fault, to paraphrase Russell.[22] In any case, it would be *unseemly*, given the liberties that Nietzsche takes as an invectivist, not to permit oneself the odd joke at *his* expense. But how could Nietzsche's profound theory of passional self-discipline originate out of superficial sentimental self-indulgence? How indeed? "How *could* anything originate out of its opposite?" one might as well ask, "for example, truth out of error? or the will to truth out of the will to deception? or selfless deeds out of selfishness? or the pure and sunlike gaze of the sage out of lust?" (BGE 2). Presumably in the same way that Nietzsche's anti-Romanticism originated out of his Romanticism, "[f]or one may doubt," as Nietzsche does, "whether there are any opposites at all" (BGE 2).

Ernst Behler maintains—and I agree—that Nietzsche was, and remained, a

[22] In Russell's notoriously unsympathetic chapter on Nietzsche in his *History of Western Philosophy*, he wrote that "Nietzsche's superman is very like Siegfried, except that he knows Greek. This may seem odd, but that is not my fault" (687). But it is!

Romantic in many respects (*"Frühromantische Schule"*). His attacks against Romanticism—and Wagner in particular—are attacks on himself, or at least on that in himself which he wished to surmount. Whether and to what degree he was successful in this undertaking is a vexed question, and one's approach to answering it will depend on how willing one is to differentiate between his life and his work. Thomas Mann refers to the "self-overcoming of romanticism in and through Nietzsche" as the "most awe-inspiring event…of German intellectual history" (qtd. in Montinari 144), though it is unclear to me why Goethe is not more deserving of this particular distinction. Goethe's famous advice in his sonnet "*Natur und Kunst* [Nature and Art]," "*Wer Grosses will, Muss sich zusammenraffen*" [Those who will greatness must pull themselves together] (*German Poetry* 58), was taken very seriously by Nietzsche, for whom Goethe's greatness lay precisely in his having "disciplined himself to wholeness" as he puts it in *Twilight of the Idols* in an apparent allusion to these lines (9.49). But what Nietzsche says of the nineteenth century in general is all too true of himself in particular. In a sense he too strives "for all that which Goethe as a person had striven for," but unfortunately "the overall result is no Goethe" (9.50). In fact, as the following recollection by Ida Overbeck from 1882 shows, the effect is more Werther than anything else:

> I had told Nietzsche that the Christian religion could not give me solace and fulfillment. I dared to say it: the idea of God contained too little reality for me. Deeply moved, he answered: "You are saying this only to come to my aid; never give up this idea! You have it unconsciously. One great thought dominates your life: the idea of God." He swallowed painfully. His features were completely

> contorted with emotion, until they then took on a stony calm. "I have given him up, I want to make something new, I will not and must not go back. I will perish from my passions, they will cast me back and forth; I am constantly falling apart, but I do not care." (qtd. in Gilman 145)

In case one imagines that Overbeck took the artistic liberty of adding a little dramatic color to this exchange in retrospect, consider the following passage from Nietzsche's own pen, which occurs in a letter to Peter Gast written the previous year:

> Ah, my friend, sometimes the idea runs through my head that I am living an extremely dangerous life, for I am one of those machines which can explode. The intensities of my feelings make me shudder and laugh; several times I could not leave my room for the ridiculous reason that my eyes were inflamed—from what? Each time, I had wept too much on my previous day's walk, not sentimental tears but tears of joy; I sang and talked nonsense, filled with a glimpse of things which put me in advance of all other men. (SL 178)

There are plenty of comparable examples that could be adduced as evidence of Nietzsche's emotional instability, as anybody familiar with his biography knows. Perhaps one of his most touching admissions is a diary entry from the time of *Zarathustra*: "I do not wish to live *again*," he writes. "How have I borne life? By creating. What has made me endure? The vision of the *Übermensch* who affirms life. I have tried to affirm life *myself*—but ah!" (qtd. in Heller 14).

Now, whatever one thinks about the occasional joke at Nietzsche's expense, it may seem unfair to drag his private jottings into the light and to use them against him.

Even the happiest among us have their *mauvais quarts d'heure*, and the above passage may be nothing more significant than a brief moment of weakness on Nietzsche's part. In addition, while a chain may be only as strong as its weakest link, a person—considered as a creator anyway, as opposed to as a moral agent—is as great as his or her greatest moments. But Nietzsche is a thinker who writes that the "only possible criticism of any philosophy, and the only one that proves anything, is trying to see if one can live by this philosophy" (SE 8), and who has no compunction in accusing Socrates of nihilism on the basis of an unguarded—and arguably ironic—remark.[23] Why then should this kind of evidence of an inability to practice what he preaches be inadmissible in *his* case? Perhaps it should not be inadmissible, but then perhaps too it should not be counted as evidence against him anyway. There are few philosophers who have lived out their philosophy as authentically as Nietzsche did his, even if, like Zarathustra, he was not always able to live up to it. As he writes in *Schopenhauer as Educator,* "Even the greatest human being is dwarfed by his ideal" (3).

In any case, Nietzsche was rarely the happiest of persons, nor did he especially aspire to be. "What matters happiness?" asks Zarathustra. "I have long ceased to be concerned with happiness; I am concerned with my work" (4.1). Whatever one's position on the general question of their relation, there is no need to differentiate between Zarathustra and his creator in this particular instance, since Nietzsche repeatedly makes

[23] Socrates' last words—as recorded in the *Phaedo*—were "Crito, I owe a cock to Asclepius. Do not forget to pay the debt." Sick persons who slept in the Greek god of healing's temples sacrificed a cock to him in the hope of getting well. Socrates apparently implies by his words that death is the cure for the illness that is life. See *The Gay Science* 340 and *Twilight of the Idols*, "The Problem of Socrates" for Nietzsche's interpretation of this incident.

similar claims in his own voice. In *Ecce Homo*, for example, he states that he had the right to bury his forty-fourth year since "whatever was life in it has been saved, is immortal," and in *Human, All Too Human* he treats the same topic at greater length:

> *Joy in age*.—The thinker, and the artist likewise, whose better self has taken refuge in his work, feels an almost malicious joy when he sees how his body and his spirit are being slowly broken down and destroyed by time: it is as though he observed from a corner, a thief working away at his money-chest, while knowing that the chest is empty and all the treasure it contained safe. (209)

But notice that this "justification by works," when taken together with Nietzsche's *Lebensphilosophie*, leads to a curious axiological circularity, although it may be virtuous rather than vicious. The test of a philosophy's worth is held to be the kind of life that it makes possible, while the test of a life's worth is the kind of philosophy that such a life makes possible in turn. This mutually-enriching reciprocity—the fact that he lives "on [his] own credit" as he puts it in *Ecce Homo* (Preface 1)—is one more illustration of the hopelessness, where Nietzsche is concerned, of trying to draw too sharp a distinction between the author of the texts that bear his name and the literary character who emerges from a reading of them; a theme that Alexander Nehamas develops with great virtuosity in his inspired study *Nietzsche: Life as Literature*. Nietzsche's privileging of his work over his happiness, and his broader rejection of hedonistic values in favor of creativity, lead him to play down the significance of suffering, and to see little merit in compassion or pity, the virtue around which the action of *Parsifal* revolves, if one can speak of

"action" in that ponderous work. In the final section of this chapter, I take a look at the huge impact that *Parsifal* had on Nietzsche.

4. *Parsifal*

Although its libretto is based on a medieval Christian grail legend, and draws too on Celtic paganism and Schopenhauerian themes, Wagner's last music drama *Parsifal*, the story of a "pure fool" who resists sexual temptation and is "made wise through compassion" is his most nearly Buddhist work. Wagnerian sentimentality aside, the complementarity of *prajñā* and *karuṇā*—or wisdom and compassion—is indeed a central tenet of Buddhism, and especially of the Mahāyāna, in which they are sometimes represented as the two wings on which one flies to the island of enlightenment. In 1865 Wagner actually wrote a prose sketch for an opera *Die Sieger* (*The Victors*) based on material from Eugène Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien*. It tells the story of Prakriti,[24] a young girl who falls in love with a disciple of the Buddha's, and who is eventually united with him, not in marriage, but by becoming a member of the *sangha*:

> —The *Buddha* on his last journey.—*Ananda* given water from the well by Prakriti, the Tchandala maiden. Her tumult of love for *Ananda*; his consternation.—

[24] The name is significant. *Prakṛti*, which is a common given name among Indian women, literally means primal nature. It is one of the two basic categories of Sāṃkhya ontology, the other being *puruṣa*, or pure consciousness. *"Puruṣa"* is a masculine noun, whereas *"prakṛti"* is feminine.

> *Prakriti* in love's agony: her mother brings *Ananda* to her: love's battle royal: Ananda, distressed and moved to tears, released by *Chakya* [the Buddha]—
>
> *Prakriti* goes to *Buddha*, under the tree at the city's gate, to plead for union with *Ananda*. He asks if she is willing to fulfil the stipulations of such union? Dialogue with twofold meaning, interpreted by *Prakriti* in the sense of her passion; she sinks horrified and sobbing to the ground, when she hears at length that she must share Ananda's vow of chastity. *Ananda* persecuted by the *Brahmins*. Reproofs against Buddha's commerce with a Tchandala girl. Buddha's attack on the spirit of Caste. He tells of Prakriti's previous incarnation; she then was the daughter of a haughty Brahmin; the Tchandala King, remembering a former existence as Brahmin, had craved the Brahmin's daughter for his son, who had conceived a violent passion for her; in pride and arrogance the daughter had refused return of love, and mocked at the unfortunate. This she had now to expiate, reborn as Tchandala to feel the torments of a hopeless love; yet to renounce withal, and be led to full redemption by acceptance into Buddha's flock.—*Prakriti* answers Buddha's final question with a joyful Yea. Ananda welcomes her as sister. *Buddha's* last teachings. All are converted by him. He departs to the place of his redemption. (*Prose Works* 8: 385 – 6)

Wagner's work on *Die Sieger* never progressed beyond this sketch, but several key elements were incorporated into *Parsifal*, including the central ideas of chastity and compassion. Prakriti metamorphizes into the temptress Kundry, a drifting spirit who has apparently undergone various incarnations. She is condemned to roam the earth like the wandering Jew for having mocked at Christ on the cross. In her study of *Parsifal* Lucy Beckett notes that "Schopenhauer himself called *Schadenfreude*—Kundry's crime—'the worst trait in human nature…It is diabolical and its derision is the laughter of hell.' It is, of course," she observes, "the exact opposite of compassion" (12). And just as in *Die*

Sieger Prakriti is liberated by the compassion of Ananda and the Buddha, so Kundry is accepted by Gurnemanz into the brotherhood of the Grail and finally freed from her curse by Parsifal, who, "made wise through compassion," resists her attempt to seduce him. The Belgian critic Maurice Kufferath reads *Parsifal* as a straightforwardly Schopenhauerian Buddhist work and asserts, as Beckett explains it, that "Kundry represents the Will to Live or Desire, Amfortas Suffering Born of Desire, and Parsifal Renunciation of Desire and therefore Peace in Negation" (111).

Critical responses to *Parsifal,* as is usual in the case of Wagner, are divided between extremes of revulsion and reverence; it has been dismissed as "a heavyweight *Magic Flute*" and embraced as "a quasi-liturgical event" (Beckett 129). The steadfastly Catholic Liszt wrote that "[m]any poets known to be religious and Catholic"—which Wagner was *not*—"[come] nowhere near Wagner's level of religious feeling," while Thomas Mann on the other hand "regarded its 'religious significance' as a trick played on the audience's emotions by the music" (Beckett 129 – 30). As well as being Wagner's most Buddhist-influenced opera, *Parsifal* is also—owing to its Christian religiosity and its idealization of chastity and compassion—the one that Nietzsche most opposes on ideological grounds. And as usual in the case of Nietzsche contra Wagner, Nietzsche has difficulty maintaining his outward show of ideological opposition in the face of the overpowering impression the music makes on him.

In *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche writes that at the very same time that he sent two copies of *Human, All Too Human* to the Wagners in Bayreuth, by "a miraculously meaningful coincidence" he received a copy of the text of *Parsifal*, and imagines the books crossing

in the mail "as if two swords had crossed" (EH HAH 5). In fact the libretto of *Parsifal* was delivered to him on January 3, 1878, four months before *Human, All Too Human* was published. This piece of poetic misrepresentation on Nietzsche's part is typical of his cavalier treatment of the facts surrounding his break with Wagner. In the 1886 preface to volume two of *Human, All Too Human* he depicts the composer as a "decaying, despairing romantic, suddenly [sinking] down helpless and shattered before the Christian cross" (3); but there was nothing sudden about it at all. When he does this, writes Thomas Mann, "he fails to see—or would have us fail to see—that the emotional world of *Tannhäuser* already anticipates that of *Parsifal*, and that the latter work is simply the summation and supremely logical conclusion of a profoundly romantic-Christian *oeuvre"* (94). To be more exact, he fails—whether deliberately or not—to *remember*, as the following excerpt from an 1868 letter to Erwin Rohde conclusively proves:

> Moreover, Wagner has a sphere of feeling which is totally hidden from O. Jahn: Jahn remains a frontier hero, a healthy man, to whom the *Tannhäuser* saga and the *Lohengrin* athmosphere are a closed world. In Wagner, as in Schopenhauer, I like the ethical air, the Faustian odor, Cross, Death, Grave, and so on. (SL 33)

Even more damningly for Nietzsche, we know on the evidence of Cosima Wagner's diary that the two read an early draft of *Parsifal* itself together on Christmas day 1869: "read *Parzival* with Prof. Nietzsche," she notes, "renewed feelings of awe"

(176).[25] And as late as October 10 1877 Nietzsche is still capable of writing to Cosima: "The glorious promise of Parcival may comfort us in all things where we need consolation"[26] (qtd. in Müller, Wapnewski and Deathridge 338)—though he can scarcely have meant those words wholeheartedly by then, working as he was on *Human, All Too Human*. His initial mixed reaction to the finished version of the libretto a few months later is recorded in a January 4, 1878 letter to Reinhart von Seydlitz (the full score was not completed until 1882):

> Yesterday *Parsifal* reached me, sent by Wagner. First impression: more Liszt than Wagner, spirit of the Counter-Reformation; for me, all too accustomed as I am to Greek things, to what is human in a generally valid way, it is all too Christian, time-bound, limited; sheer fantastic psychology; no flesh and too much blood (especially too much blood at the Holy Communion); also, I do not like the hysterical women….The language sounds like a translation from a foreign tongue. But the situations and their sequence—is this not the highest poetry? Is it not an ultimate challenge to music? (SL 166)

So, leaving aside the question as to its genuineness or otherwise, it is clear that Wagner's dalliance with Christianity cannot have come as a sudden shock to Nietzsche. He even refers to it in a letter to Malwida von Meysenbug on the occasion of Wagner's

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[25] Joachim Köhler, in his rather sensationalist and speculative *Nietzsche and Wagner: A Lesson in Subjugation* suggests that Cosima's reading of the text alone with Nietzsche while Wagner took a nap was a teasing contrivance on her part of a kind of unconsummated Paolo and Francesca moment between them: "Here was a story that told of the 'pain of seduction', of 'the hidden demon of sin and guilt', of 'beautiful creatures in skimpy, provocative attire'—in short, it stimulated all the thoughts that might flash through the mind of a lonely professor in the company of…an adulterous young mother sitting among the silks and satins of a luxurious drawing room" (50-1).

[26] The variant spellings of "Parsifal" reflect the fact that Wagner had not yet settled on a preferred form.

death as a "slow return and creeping back to Christianity and the church" (qtd. in Müller, Wapnewski, and Deathridge 338). But he obviously reached a point in the mid 1870's when he could no longer hide from himself his increasing realization of how great the distance was that separated him from Wagner, an un-self-deceiving that was one of the most traumatic events of his life. "The renunciation that it required," he wrote to Lou Salomé, "the rediscovering of myself that eventually became necessary, was among the hardest and most melancholy things that have befallen me" (SL 188). His problems with the turn that Wagner took are legion, but they stem in large part from the fact that thirteen years after having first refused communion with his family, his nostalgia for Christianity is still intense:

> How one would like to exchange the false assertions of the priests that there is a God who desires that we do good, is the guardian and witness of every action, every moment, every thought, who loves us and in every misfortune wants only what is best for us—how one would like to exchange these for truths that would be as salutary, pacifying, and beneficial as those errors are! Yet such truths do not exist; the most philosophy can do is to set against them other metaphysical plausibilities (at bottom likewise untruths).[27] The tragedy, however, lies in the fact that one cannot *believe* these dogmas of religion and metaphysics if one has in one's heart and head the rigorous methods of acquiring truth, while on the other hand one has, through the development of humanity, grown so tender, sensitive and afflicted one has need of means of cure and comfort of the most potent description; from which there thus arises the danger that man may bleed to death from knowledge of truth. (HAH 109)

[27] This seems to be a clear allusion to Schopenhauer, though it is interesting to bear this idea of Nietzsche's in mind with respect to his later doctrine of eternal recurrence.

In the opening verses of Book Two of *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius notes that it is pleasant to watch from the safety of shore the troubles of another at sea during a storm; not because one takes pleasure in anybody's distress, he is careful to add, but because one delights in the suffering one is oneself spared. This is arguably an instance of what Nietzsche, in another context, calls "being *schadenfroh* but with a good conscience" (GS 200). But by the same token it is most *unpleasant* when one is lost at sea to reflect that there are others who are safe on dry land, especially if one believes that among them are deserters who have beaten a cowardly retreat. Thus Nietzsche, now and then "homesick for the land" (GS 124), feels betrayed and abandoned by those like Wagner who are guilty in his eyes of religious recidivism, though in truth he is just as much abandoner as abandonee:

> What is certain, however, is that any degree of frivolity or melancholy is better than a romantic return and desertion, an approach to Christianity in any form: for, given the current state of knowledge, one can no longer have any association with it without incurably dirtying one's intellectual conscience and prostituting it before oneself and others. Those agonies may be painful enough: but without agonies one cannot become a leader and educator of mankind; and woe to him who wants to attempt it but no longer possesses this clean conscience! (HAH 109)

Nietzsche, who prides himself on his training as a careful philologist, finds *Parsifal* so difficult to accept that he goes to fantastic lengths to misinterpret it,

wondering implausibly in *The Genealogy of Morals* if the whole thing was an elaborate joke on Wagner's part, "a kind of epilogue and satyr play with which the tragedian Wagner wanted to take leave of us" (GM 3.3), though he twice admits, even as he considers the possibility, that he is only indulging in wishful thinking. Nietzsche repeatedly blames Wagner in his letters for stealing potential disciples from him. "The old seducer Wagner, even after his death, is taking from me the few remaining people on whom I could have some influence," he writes to Malwida von Meysenbug (SL 302). His Oedipal struggles with the composer are most painfully visible where *Parsifal* is concerned. In the postscript to *The Case of Wagner*, having argued that Wagner "flatters every nihilistic (Buddhistic) instinct and disguises it in music," he claims that "[h]is last work is in this respect his greatest masterpiece…*the stroke of genius* in seduction." "I admire this work," he goes on, "I wish I had written it myself; failing that, *I understand it*." This paragraph on *Parsifal* is extraordinary, and calls for a particularly careful reading.

Nietzsche would have *us* understand that his laudatory remarks are meant sarcastically; indeed, lest there be *any* misunderstanding, he explicitly informs us that this is so. "One has to be a cynic in order not to be seduced here; one has to be able to bite in order not to worship here," he writes.[28] (Recall that sarcasm—German *Sarkasmus*—is from the Greek *sarkazein*, to "tear flesh" or "gnash the teeth.") "Well, then, you old seducer," he apostrophizes Wagner, "the cynic warns you—*cave canem*." And *caveat*

[28] Remember how the younger Nietzsche by his own admission regarded Wagner with quasi-religious reverence (SL 53).

lector too… Nietzsche's sarcastic tone serves to hide the fact that his admiration and envy is absolutely genuine! On July 25, 1882, on the eve the July 26 premiere of *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, he wrote this to Peter Gast:

> On Sunday I was in Naumburg, to prepare my sister a little for *Parsifal.* It felt strange enough. Finally I said, "My dear sister, precisely this kind of music is what I was writing when I was a boy, at the time when I wrote my oratorio"; and then I took out the old manuscript and, after all these years, played it—the *identity* of *mood* and *expression* was fabulous! Yes, a few parts, for example, "The Death of the Kings," seemed to us more moving than anything we had played from *Parsifal*, and yet they were wholly Parsifalesque. I confess that it gave me a real fright to realize *how* closely I am *akin* to Wagner. (SL 190)

That it felt "strange enough" is a strange understatement, but not nearly as strange as what follows. The music that Nietzsche wrote as a boy was nothing at all like *Parsifal*, though no doubt he *wished* that it had been, and the fright to which he confesses is a duplicitous frisson composed of self-deception as to his musical talent and self-knowledge as to his musical taste. His ambivalence about *who he is* is so great that he continues the above quoted letter to Gast by making up his mind to ask—quite untypically—for help in resolving it:

> Later I shall not conceal this curious fact from you, and you shall be the ultimate court of appeal on the matter—it is so odd that I do not quite trust myself to decide. You will understand, dear friend, that this does not mean that I am praising *Parsifal!!* What sudden *décadence!* And what Cagliostroism! (SL 190)

Nietzsche writes in *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life* and elsewhere of the impossibility of freeing oneself completely from the aberrations of one's ancestors, and warns that when we "cultivate a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature…this is always dangerous…because second natures are usually feebler than first natures" (3). That his heroic—and at times demoniac—attempts to recreate himself in his own image were only partially successful is never more evident than when Wagner is involved, and the difference between his private and public positions on Wagner even inclines one in some respects to Heidegger's peculiar view that the true Nietzsche is to be found in his unpublished writings. Although he read an early draft of *Parsifal* in 1869, Nietzsche never heard the completed work in performance, and it was not until December of 1886 that he eventually heard the prelude played by a full orchestra. But when he did, as his working notes show, he was rendered almost speechless:

> Overture to Parsifal, greatest gift I've been granted for a long time. The power and severity of feeling, indescribable, I know nothing else that grasps Christianity so deeply and presents it so distinctly for our sympathy. Entirely exalted and moved—no painter has painted such an indescribably melancholy and tender *gaze* as Wagner
>
> the greatness in capturing a terrifying certainty out of which something like compassion wells up:
>
> the greatest masterpiece of the sublime I know, the power and severity in capturing a terrifying certainty, and indescribable expression of greatness *in* the very compassion for it, no painter has painted such a dark melancholy gaze as Wagner does in the last part of the overture. Nor has Dante, nor has Leonardo.

> It's as if for the first time in many years someone were speaking to me about the problems that trouble me… (WLN 111 – 112)

There can be no doubting the sincerity of these jottings, in which he struggles to find an adequate formula for the music's tremendous effect on him, using forms of the word "indescribable" three times, and of the word "greatness" four. It is undeniable too that his response to the prelude depends critically on its expression of the *moral* emotion of compassion. But by the time he is ready to share his estimation of the music in a letter to Peter Gast, he has recovered his composure and his critical distance somewhat, and only allows himself to praise it "in purely esthetic terms" whatever *that's* supposed to mean:

> I recently heard for the first time the introduction to *Parsifal* (it was in Monte Carlo!). When I see you again, I shall tell you precisely what it gave me to *understand.* But apart from all irrelevant questions (what purpose such music *can* or *should* have?), and in purely esthetic terms: did Wagner ever compose anything better? The finest psychological intelligence and definition of what must be said here, expressed, *communicated,* the briefest and most direct form for it, every nuance of feeling pared down to an epigram; a clarity in the music as descriptive art, bringing to mind a shield with a design in relief on it; and, finally, a sublime and extraordinary feeling, experience, happening of the soul at the basis of the music, which does Wagner the highest credit, a synthesis of states which will seem incompatible to many people, even "loftier" people, with a severity that judges, an "altitude" in the terrifying sense of the word, with an intimate cognizance and perspicuity that cuts through the soul like a knife—and with a compassion for what is being *watched* and *judged.* Something of that sort

> occurs in *Dante*—nowhere else. Has any painter ever painted such a melancholy gaze of love as Wagner did with the last accents of his prelude? (SL 259 – 60)

One misses the artlessness of his first impressions here; the prose is cooler, more measured and more polished, yet this is still splendidly written criticism: subtle, sensitive, and full of insight. But the following year in *The Case of Wagner* in the passage from the postscript quoted above, his public is treated instead on the subject of *Parsifal* to the following entertaining—but comparatively unilluminating—rant:

> Wagner never had better inspirations than in the end. Here the cunning in his alliance of beauty and sickness goes so far that, as it were, it casts a shadow over Wagner's earlier art—which now seems too bright, too healthy. Do you understand this? Health, brightness having the effect of a shadow? almost of an *objection*?—To such an extent have we become *pure fools*.—Never was there a greater master in dim hieratic aromas—never was there a man equally expert in all *small* infinities, all that trembles and is effusive, all the feminisms from the *idioticon* of happiness!—Drink, O my friends, the philters of this art! Nowhere will you find a more agreeable way of enervating your spirit, of forgetting your manhood under a rosebush.—Ah this old magician! This Klingsor of all Klingsors! How he thus wages war against *us*! us, the free spirits! How he indulges every cowardice of the modern soul with the tones of magic maidens!

That Nietzsche felt honor-bound to condemn *Parsifal* of all Wagner's operas in the strongest possible terms is unsurprising. He was not alone in this. Stravinsky walked out of a performance of *Parsifal* in 1911, two years before sparking a riot—and prompting Saint-Saëns to storm out of the theater in turn—at the premiere of *Le Sacre du*

Printemps in Paris.[29] And even many otherwise enthusiastic critics have expressed grave reservations about Wagner's swan song and the "bizarre…assemblage of extreme and repellent oddities," to quote Thomas Mann (129), that constitutes its cast list. Bryan Magee notes that one of the recurring objections to Wagner's art is that "there is something passive about it all", and that this passivity is most pronounced in *Parsifal*:

> By filleting drama of motive and presenting it almost entirely in terms of emotional response Wagner shows things acting on people but not people acting on things….Wagner's recipe is for a drama that consists not of actions but of reactions. His characters are subjects only of feeling; of action they are always the objects. One can go even further and say that his main characters are victims….Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal*, passes beyond even this degree of emotional passivity and concerns itself with total renunciation. (*Aspects of Wagner* 14 – 15)

Eduard Hanslick took *Parsifal* to task for the "hysterical exaltation" of moribund symbols in it. "We can almost sense a decaying mentality," he writes, "when a modern artist sees in the relic of the Grail and in the sacred miracles the mission of German art, and proposes therewith to effect the regeneration of humanity" (qtd. in Beckett 106). And the French critic Edouard Schuré also complained eloquently about the atmosphere of exhaustion that pervades the opera:

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[29] As we saw above, Nietzsche admitted in a letter to Carl Fuchs that he had used Bizet in *The Case of Wagner* merely as "an ironic antithesis to Wagner" (SL 340), but *Le Sacre du Printemps* is surely—both thematically and musically—a genuine artistic antithesis to *Parsifal*. One wishes that Nietzsche had lived to hear—and to share his reaction to—this work!

> The feeble Grail, constantly threatened with extinction; the materialist theology of blood, devoid of any high spiritual feeling; the Redeemer paralysed by the sin of his earthly representatives—all this leaves a morbid impression barely concealed by the grandeur of the spectacle. Even in the music, beautiful though it is, there is more thirst for eternal rest than for eternal life, the active life of the soul and the spirit. The gnawing worm of pessimism has passed this way. (qtd. in Beckett 109)

Although these distinct elements of decadence and pessimism—the fact that "there is more thirst for eternal rest than for eternal life" in Schuré's splendid phrase—would be enough on their own to earn Nietzsche's enmity, his stated opposition to *Parsifal* seems to be based on its "preaching of chastity." In *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* he appends the following lines to a passage taken from *The Genealogy*: "*Parsifal* is a work of perfidy, of vindictiveness, of a secret attempt to poison the presuppositions of life—a *bad* work. The preaching of chastity remains an incitement to anti-nature: I despise everyone who does not experience *Parsifal* as an attempted assassination of basic ethics" (NCW 7.3). But his position suffers from a curious instability: elsewhere it is *Parsifal's seductiveness* that he objects to, as we saw in *The Case of Wagner* above. One might think to resolve this tension by means of a paradox of sorts, and to argue that *Parsifal* seduces not to sensuality, but to *chastity*; or at least to the hypocritical kind of chastity that Zarathustra condemns in his sermon on the subject (which, incidentally, is not as great a departure from the beatitudes as Nietzsche might have imagined.[30]) A careful reading of the

[30] "Chastity is a virtue in some, but almost a vice in many. They abstain, but the bitch, sensuality, leers out of everything they do," counsels Zarathustra (Z 1.13). "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time,

passage quoted from *The Case of Wagner* precludes this approach however. Nietzsche rails therein against beauty, femininity and magic maidens, and warns rather frantically "Nowhere will you find a more agreeable way of enervating your spirit, of forgetting your manhood under a rosebush" in an obvious allusion to the danger represented by *Kundry* as opposed to Parsifal. And in *Zarathustra* too the conscientious man alleges that for all his "preaching" Wagner pushes sensuality *sub rosa*: "You old melancholy devil: out of your lament a bird call lures us; you are like those whose praise of chastity secretly invites to voluptuous delights" (Z 4.15).

But perhaps the hue and cry over chastity or the lack thereof is really a distraction. In *Nietzsche, Wagner, and the Philosophy of Pessimism*, Roger Hollinrake argues that while Biblical Christianity is of course a target, there is a strong argument for reading book four of *Zarathustra* primarily as "a protest against the messianic pretensions of the second Bayreuth Festival" (141), and as a parody of *Parsifal* and its "nonsense about *pity*…[being] the source of all morality" (GS 99):

> The fact that in both *Parsifal* and *Zarathustra*, Part IV, the action hinges on a 'temptation-seduction' scene—or a series of temptation-seduction scenes—is, to say the least, suggestive, as is the fact that both works have a strongly religious—or anti-religious—bias. However, the case for a deliberate, inverse parallel finally rests on the fact that the temptation in the one results in the learning and the acceptance of 'pity', in the other in the learning and repudiation of 'pity'. The fury of Nietzsche's attack falls upon the syncretism peculiar to *Parsifal*,

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Thou shalt not commit adultery: but I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart," counsels Jesus (Matthew 5:28).

> where Buddhism and allegedly 'authentic' Christianity are regarded as all but indistinguishable….*Parsifal* relates how a sense of suffering awakened in the course of the hero's temptation by the sorcerer and his minions elicits the only adequate moral response in pity; *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Part IV, relates how a will to creative self-mastery beyond good and evil, which accepts suffering as a necessary if not desirable contingency, demands the conquest of pity. (144 – 7)

Hollinrake points to numerous thematic and imagerial correspondences in order to support his thesis, among them Nietzsche's "fanciful caricature of Wagner, the 'actor', 'musician', and 'magician', in the likeness of his own Klingsor," and "the concluding allusion to Zarathustra's tempters collectively as 'flowers'," which he rightly describes (in connection with the flower maidens in *Parsifal*) as "a far-fetched piece of imagery almost unintelligible outside the context of a Wagnerian parody" (166 – 7).

In *Parsifal* Kundry's crime is *Schadenfreude*, "the laughter of hell" as Schopenhauer has it, but for a tormented Nietzsche in a letter to Overbeck postmarked Christmas day 1882—the year of *Parsifal's* premiere—it is *pity* that is "a kind of hell—whatever the Schopenhauerians may say" (SL 199). "What has so far been the greatest sin here on earth?" asks Zarathustra in a passage that alludes to Luke 6:25. "Was it not the word of him who said, 'Woe unto those who laugh here?' Did he himself find no reasons on earth for laughing? Then he searched very badly. Even a child could find reasons here" (Z 4.13.16). In "On Those Who Are Sublime" Zarathustra criticizes the "ascetic of the spirit"—who (in a common conceit) is both Jesus and Nietzsche—for not having yet "learned laughter or beauty": "With a swelled chest and like one who holds in his breath, he stood there, the sublime one, silent, decked out with ugly truths, the spoil of

his hunting, and rich in torn garments; many thorns too adorned him—yet I saw no rose" (2.13). Later Zarathustra throws his rose-wreath crown to the higher men, pronounces laughter holy, and urges them to learn to laugh (Z 4.13.20), in an attempt to set up laughter, or "being *schadenfroh* but with a good conscience" (GS 200) as a cardinal virtue against pity or compassion. The action of part four of *Zarathustra* turns on its protagonist's successfully overcoming the last temptation to pity to which the cry of distress exposes him in order to usher in the "great noon."

In *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche explains that he composed his *Manfred Meditation* as a "counter-overture" to Schumann's *Manfred* "[s]imply from fury against this sugary Saxon" (2.4). If one agrees—as I do—with Hollinrake's thesis that the final part of *Zarathustra* is a kind of counter-*Parsifal*—composed against a far more threatening "sugary Saxon"—Nietzsche's increasingly extreme animosity to *Parsifal* in his final years becomes readily understandable. He *thought* that in *Zarathustra* he had withstood the challenge presented by Wagner's last opera, and its valorization of a kind of sentimental compassion, but confronted several years later with his first—and *only*—exposure to the prelude in performance, his resistance simply collapsed into stunned admiration.

Nietzsche was of course well aware of the Buddhist elements in *Parsifal*, which is clearly the work he has in mind when he writes in *The Gay Science* that "Wagner is Schopenhauerian in his attempts to understand Christianity as a seed of Buddhism that has been carried far away by the wind, and to prepare a Buddhistic epoch in Europe, with an occasional *rapprochement* with Catholic-Christian formulas and sentiments" (99). In

the following paragraph of the same section he accuses Wagner of having mastered the art of "[dressing] up his hatred against certain things and people as mercy for animals," thereby providing further evidence of his reading of *Parsifal* as a central plank in the attempt to initiate a European form of Buddhism. (Parsifal's first action in the drama is the senseless killing of a swan, for which Gurnemanz strongly censures him.[31]) So his view of "Buddhism for Europeans" as synonymous with nihilism (GM Preface 5) is in large part a result of his rejection of Wagner in general, and of *Parsifal* in particular. It follows that no adequate account of the compatibility of Nietzsche's thought with genuine Buddhism—as opposed to the Schopenhauerian or Wagnerian variety—can be given without some consideration of the similarities and differences between the Buddhist virtue of *karuṇā* and what Nietzsche saw as the vice of *Mitleid*. This is among the issues dealt with in the next chapter on suffering and compassion.

[31] The episode recalls an incident from the life of the Buddha in which his cousin Devadatta shoots, but only wounds, a goose (Hollinrake 278n31).

Part 2

Nietzsche and Buddhism

Chapter 3

Suffering and Compassion

1. Introduction

After he had attained enlightenment, the Buddha made his way to the Deer Park at Isipatana, near the Northern Indian town of Varanasi. There he preached his first sermon to five ascetics with whom he had previously undergone austerities. In this sermon he taught that proper spiritual practice follows the middle way (*madhyamā-pratipad*) between the extremes of self-mortification and self-indulgence, and set forth the basic tenets of Buddhism in the so-called Four Noble Truths (*catvāri āryasatyāni*). The first—and foremost—of these tenets is the Noble Truth of Suffering:

> Birth is Suffering, Decay is Suffering, Sickness is Suffering, Death is Suffering, likewise Sorrow and Grief, Woe, Lamentation and Despair. To be conjoined with things which we dislike, to be separated from things which we like——that also is Suffering. Not to get what one wants——that also is Suffering. (Woodward 8)

One might add (and indeed Schopenhauer did) that to get what one wants is suffering also. Or as George Bernard Shaw wrote in *Man and Superman:* "[T]here are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart's desire. The other is to gain it" (208).

Nineteenth century Romantics saw Buddhism as the pessimistic religion *par excellence*. The Sanskrit term *duḥkha* (Pāli *dukkha*) is frequently rendered as "suffering" or "sorrow" in English. But such words have a somewhat harsher emotive meaning than the original term does, as the following entry on *dukkha* in the *Pali-English Dictionary* makes clear:

> There is no word in English covering the same ground as Dukkha does in Pali.... We are forced, therefore, in translation to use half synonyms, no one of which is exact... Discomfort, suffering, ill, and trouble can occasionally be used in certain circumstances. Misery, distress, agony, affliction and woe are never right. They are all much too strong and are only mental. (Rhys Davids and Stede 324)

Duḥkha is closely related to *anitya*, or impermanence, so that even inanimate objects can be characterized as *duḥkha*. "Unsatisfactoriness" and "insufficiency" are two additional partial synonyms. It is the feeling, to allude to Robert Browning, that one's grasp is never equal to one's reach. "Worry," "agitation," "uneasiness," and "stress" also come close to describing what can amount to no more than the mild and subtle psychic tension which results, as Katsuki Sekida observes in his manual *Zen Training*, from people's deep-rooted inability to take things as they are without an evaluative mental running commentary: "When a thought appears in your mind, it is necessarily accompanied by internal pressure. Even when you think, 'It's fine today,' a certain internal pressure is generated in your mind, and you feel you want to speak to someone else and say, 'It's fine today, isn't it?'" (36).

Although there are discussions in the Pāli canon of the various joys which life has to offer, it is undeniable that many passages do have a distinctly pessimistic flavor. Rapture is viewed, to cite Shelly's "Adonais," as "that unrest which men miscall delight," and the Buddha provides vivid descriptions of the amount of suffering accrued over endless lives:

> Now what think ye? Whether is the greater, the flood of tears shed by you on this long journey, for ever running through the round of birth and death, weeping and wailing because of union with the undesired, because of separation from the desired——or the water of the four mighty oceans? (Woodward 183)

According to the second Noble Truth, suffering arises owing to inappropriate desire or craving (*tṛṣṇā*), the object of which may be sensual pleasures, existence, or nonexistence. The third Noble Truth explains that the cessation of suffering, or *nirvāṇa*, is possible, by putting an end to the three unwholesome mental states of greed, hatred, and delusion; the so-called roots of evil from which craving grows. Finally the fourth Noble Truth spells out in detail the way to do this by following a program of wisdom, virtue, and meditation called the Noble Eightfold Path (*āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*).

Nietzsche, if anyone ever did, knew from experience what it was to suffer. For the greater part of his adult life his health was absolutely dismal. He was often in physical agony, beset, as he once described it himself, by "the torments that go with an uninterrupted three-day migraine, accompanied by laborious vomiting of phlegm" (EH 1.1). He was no stranger to emotional pain either, being beset in particular by terrible

loneliness. "I am solitude become man," he proclaimed, in a draft section of *Ecce Homo* (BW 799). And, as mentioned earlier, he wrote in *Beyond Good and Evil* that the thought of suicide was a powerful comfort (157).

But although Nietzsche would agree with the claim the Buddha makes in the first Noble Truth that suffering pervades this world, and might even acknowledge that it is caused by craving, as the Buddha asserts in the second Noble Truth, things become more complicated with the third and fourth Noble Truths on the cessation of suffering and the path thereto respectively.

First, it is unclear whether Nietzsche believes that suffering can be done away with. "An age of happiness is quite impossible, because men want only to desire it but not to have it, and every individual who experiences good times learns to downright pray for misery and disquietude," he writes; "The destiny of man is designed for *happy moments*—every life has them—but not for happy ages" (HAH 471). Yet though it cannot be denied that boredom often sets in when a person's desires have been fulfilled, it certainly can be denied that everybody positively needs unhappiness, and it is possible that Nietzsche is extrapolating illicitly from his own case in this instance. In any event, the idea that human beings are not constituted for protracted contentment is one of his favorites. "'Eternal bliss': psychological nonsense," he notes succinctly in 1887 (WP 579).

Second, it is unclear whether Nietzsche believes that even supposing suffering *could* be done away with, it *should*. "You want, if possible—and there is no more insane 'if possible'—*to abolish suffering,"* he addresses utilitarians and the like. "And we? It

really seems that we would rather have it higher and worse than ever" (BGE 225). His worry in a word about the project of eliminating suffering is that the cure may turn out to be worse than the disease. In *Schopenhauer as Educator* he cites approvingly Meister Eckhart's claim that "the creature that will bear you most swiftly to perfection is suffering" (4), and in *Beyond Good and Evil* he puts the same point in his own words: "The discipline of suffering—of *great* suffering—do you not know that only *this* discipline has created all enhancements of man so far?" (225). Nietzsche may have rejected Romantic metaphysics, but he never wholly relinquished Romantic aesthetics, especially the belief that pain is the cost of creativity and greatness of character. "The price of fruitfulness is to be rich in internal opposition," he writes in *Twilight of the Idols;* "one remains young only as long as the soul does not stretch itself and desire peace" (5.3). Perhaps, by conferring meaning on his misery, this conviction gave him the strength to bear it, for "[w]hat really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering," he believes (GM 2.7).

In what follows in this chapter I explore Nietzsche's ideas about the significance of suffering and the value of compassion from a Buddhist perspective. I first consider some parallels between the problem that suffering poses for Nietzsche—given his advocacy of a philosophy of uncompromising life-affirmation—and the theistic problem of evil. I then consider Nietzsche's negative assessment of the Buddhist position on suffering, which I argue is based on a deficient understanding on Nietzsche's part of the nature and aims of Buddhist praxis. In the final sections, I examine Nietzsche's critique of compassion, and try to determine to what extent his criticisms of compassion as he

sees it are relevant to the Buddhist virtue of *karuṇā.* I argue that Nietzsche's analysis of the nature of compassion is at best only half-correct, and that to the extent that it is correct, not particularly applicable to *karuṇā.* I try to show that Buddhist strategies for dealing with both one's own suffering and that of others have more in common with strategies that Nietzsche proposes than he realizes.

2. The Problem of Suffering

It seems to me that one good way to get clear about Nietzsche's thinking on suffering is by comparing it to theistic thought about evil. The problem of evil, from the perspective of a believer, can be described as the difficulty of sustaining one's faith in God in the face of the profusion and variety of evil in the world. I am thinking here less of theoretical formulations, such as the logical and evidential problems of evil, than I am of what has been called, among other things, the existential problem of evil, which is not so easy to define sharply. "Simply put," Chad Meister writes, "it is the notion that the existential feel of certain kinds of evil leads to disbelief in God or religious belief in general." He gives the following example:

> Some time ago I was with a group of friends waiting in line at a restaurant. We were engaged in a fairly sophisticated theological discussion…when a young woman standing ahead of us asked if we were talking about God. "Yes, we are," I said. "We're actually discussing the nature and attributes of God." "Well," she

> said, "I quit believing in God two years ago. While my dad was suffering and dying of cancer, I decided that I could no longer believe in God." As she said these words, she became emotional. I could almost feel her pain as tears began to stream down her face in her agony over her lost father and the pain he must have went through.[32] (138)

The analogous problem of suffering, for Nietzsche, is the difficulty of upholding his love of life in the face of all the suffering in the world. The various strategies Nietzsche adopts to deal with this suffering parallel various attempts that have been made to respond to the theistic problem of evil; though of course, given that he rejects a libertarian conception of free will, there is no analogue of the free will defense in Nietzsche's work.

One response to the problem of evil is that of St. Irenaeus, who developed what John Hick calls a "soul making" theodicy. Here, it is pointed out that the existence of various evils is a necessary condition of moral and spiritual growth. There could be no such thing as courage, for example, if one were never in danger of experiencing pain, nor could the virtue of forgiveness exist in a world in which there were no misdeeds. Thus, although this world is "manifestly not designed for the maximization of human pleasure

[32] Compare this passage by Peter Van Inwagen in which he admits that philosophers like himself may be temperamentally unsuited to respond to what he calls the "personal" or "pastoral" problem: "If a grieving mother whose child had just died of leukemia were to say to me 'How could God do this?', my first inclination would be to answer her by saying, 'But you already knew that the children of lots of other mothers have died of leukemia. You were willing to say that he must have had some good reason in those cases. Surely you see that it's just irrational to have a different response when it's your own child who dies of leukemia?' Now I see as clearly as you do that this would be an abysmally cruel and stupid thing to say, and even I wouldn't in fact say it. I should, however, have to bite back an impulse to say it, and that's why I'm the wrong person to respond to that question under those circumstances." (10)

and the minimization of human pain," as Hick writes, it "may nevertheless be rather well adapted to the quite different purpose of 'soul making'" (47). Nietzsche makes a related point in the preface to *The Gay Science:*

> Only great pain, the long, slow pain that takes its time—on which we are burned, as it were, with green wood—compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths and to put aside all trust, everything good-natured, everything that would interpose a veil, that is mild, that is medium—things in which formerly we may have found our humanity. I doubt that such pain makes us "better"; but I know that it makes us more *profound*. (GS 3)

Another response to evil is process theodicy, according to which reality is at bottom a process of "creativity continually producing new unities of experience out of the manifold of the previous moment" (Hick 49). These unities of experience are valuable insofar as they exhibit harmony and intensity, rather than their opposites, discord and triviality. But the positive values of harmony and intensity are to some degree in tension with each other, since the greater complexity that allows for greater intensity comes with a risk of greater discord. As a result, as Hick explains, some amount of evil seems inescapable:

> So one form of evil or the other, either discord or needless triviality, is virtually inevitable within the creative process. Even more important perhaps, greater complexity, making possible greater richness of experience, also makes possible new dimensions of suffering. Thus human beings can have qualities of enjoyment beyond the capacity of lower forms of life, but they are also subject to

> moral and spiritual anguishes which far exceed those of the lower animals and which can even drive humans to suicide. (50)

Again, Nietzsche repeatedly makes related points. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he presents "a metaphysics of art" (24) according to which the Dionysian tragic myth "[justifies] the existence of even the 'worst world'" (25), by convincing us that "even the ugly and disharmonic" aspects of experience are as much a requirement for a meaningful life as dissonance is for meaningful music; pain is "part of an artistic game that the will in the eternal amplitude of its joy plays with itself" (24). And in *The Gay Science* he criticizes intrusive do-gooders who want to make things easier for people. Our would-be benefactors do not realize that "to put it mystically, the path to one's one heaven always leads through the voluptuousness of one's own hell," he writes. People who are "comfortable and benevolent" know little of human happiness on this view, "for happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins that either grow up together or…*remain small* together" (338).

Of course, both soul making and process theodicies have been met with strong objections. Just as pain makes possible virtues like courage and compassion, argues the critic of soul making, it also makes possible vices like cowardice and cruelty; and although a tincture of suffering may serve to make a life more enjoyable overall, in the way that some discord serves to increase the interest of a musical composition, there are many lives which, metaphorically speaking, seem more cacophonous than consonant, according to the critic of process theodicy.

But this is not the place to rehearse these familiar criticisms in detail; what I want to do is track the evolution of Nietzsche's thinking on the question whether the existence of pain can be adduced as "an objection to life" (EH Z 1). Although Nietzsche does make remarks about the significance of suffering that remind one of the soul making and process theodicies, what appears to be his considered position bears a close structural resemblance to what is called skeptical theism: the idea that the existence of evil does not constitute grounds for doubting the goodness of God.

Define a pointless evil as an evil the existence of which is not necessary to bring about some greater good. Then according to the evidential argument from evil, it is probable that there are pointless evils. But if God existed, there would not be any pointless evils; therefore it is probable that God does not exist. Skeptical theists object to this argument by questioning our epistemic right to assert its first premise, maintaining that we have no way of telling of any evil that it is probably pointless, since if God does exist we should not expect to be able to discover the point of many evils, given the huge differences that obtain between his purported capacities and ours. The idea, in short, is that for all we know, God may have good reasons for allowing *seemingly* pointless evils to occur, reasons that are completely inaccessible from our limited perspective. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so God's ways are said to be higher than our ways. The skeptical theist accordingly takes the view that we are in no real position to speculate about God's reasons.[33] Nietzsche of course will have nothing to do with talk of heaven

[33] Nietzsche displays an awareness of the theological trend that eventuated in skeptical theism in *Assorted Opinions and Maxims:* "*Christian scepticism.*—Christians today like to set up Pilate, with his question

or God, but what the theist claims of God, he claims of *this world:* namely that it is axiologically transcendent. *"The total value of the world cannot be evaluated;* consequently philosophical pessimism belongs among comical things," he notes (WP 708). In other words, the existence of suffering does not constitute grounds for doubting the goodness—in some sense that remains to be made clear—of life. Over the next few pages I will try to show how Nietzsche arrived at this idea.

3. The Value of Life

"People wish to think the universe good, and will be lenient to bad arguments proving that it is so, while bad arguments proving that it is bad are closely scanned," Bertrand Russell maintains in the chapter on Leibniz from his *History of Western Philosophy*. "In fact, of course, the world is partly good and partly bad, and no 'problem of evil' arises unless this obvious fact is denied," he insists with characteristic sobriety (Russell 590). In an important section of *Human, All Too Human,* during his positivistic period, Nietzsche makes essentially the same point in dismissing both Leibnizian and Schopenhauerian thinking:

> *Words in bad odour.*—Away with those overused words optimism and pessimism! We have had enough of them. Occasion for using them is growing less day by day; it is only idle chatterers who still have such an indispensible

"What is truth?', as an advocate of Christ, so as to cast suspicion on everything known or knowable, and to erect the cross against the dreadful background of the impossibility of knowing" (8).

> need of them. For why in the world should anyone want to be an optimist if he does not have to defend a God who *has* to have created the best of worlds if he himself is goodness and perfection—but what thinker still has need of the hypothesis of a God?—But any occasion for a pessimistic creed is likewise lacking, unless one has an interest in provoking the advocates of God, the theologians, or the theologizing philosophers, and forcefully asserting the opposite point of view: that evil reigns, that there exists more pain than pleasure, that the world is an artifice, the apparition of an evil will to live. But who still bothers about theologians—except other theologians?—Disregarding theology and opposition to theology, it is quite obvious that the world is neither good nor evil, let alone the best of all or the worst of all worlds, and that these concepts "good" and "evil" possess meaning only when applied to men, and perhaps even here are, as they are usually employed, unjustified: in any event, we must cast off both that conception of the world that inveighs against it and that which glorifies it. (HAH 28)

A few sections later, Nietzsche develops this line of thought further. "All judgements as to the value of life have evolved illogically and are therefore unjust," he claims, basically because nobody knows enough of life to make a judgment that would not be premature. "Perhaps it would follow from all this that one ought not to judge at all," he continues, "if only it were possible to *live* without evaluating, without having aversions and partialities!" (HAH 32). But it is not possible for us to live like this in Nietzsche's view; we know that we have no right to form a total evaluation of life, but we cannot help feeling the urge to do so. This idea—which echoes the Kantian theme that the nature of human reason is to pose questions which it cannot ignore, but which, since

they transcend its powers, it is unable to answer—is one to which Nietzsche frequently returns, as in the following passage from *Beyond Good and Evil:*

> [A] philosopher…demands of himself a judgment, a Yes or No, not about the sciences but about life and the value of life—[but] he is reluctant to come to believe that he has a right, or even a duty, to such a judgment, and must seek his way to this right and faith [*Glaube*] only from the most comprehensive—perhaps most disturbing and destructive—experiences, and frequently hesitates, doubts, and lapses into silence. (BGE 205)

In *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche argues again that this demand is unreasonable, insisting that statements about the value of existence as a whole are not truth-apt: the totality of things is not the kind of subject of which either value or disvalue could sensibly be predicated. "One would require a position outside of life, and yet have to know it as well as one, as many, as all who have lived it, in order to be permitted even to touch the problem of the *value* of life," he writes; "reasons enough to comprehend that this problem is for us an unapproachable problem" (5.5).

The claim that only somebody who was somehow positioned outside of life would be at all competent to judge it is not *prima facie* terribly convincing. According to an apocryphal anecdote somebody once said to Voltaire that life was hard, to which Voltaire responded "Compared to what?" But presumably the answer to this question is: "Compared to how it might be in some possible world." A person who had never left his or her country of origin, for example, might nevertheless form a fairly reliable overall assessment of its merits, though clearly this assessment would differ in various ways

from that of a well-traveled compatriot, or an ex-patriot resident from abroad. To vary the analogy, it seems possible to evaluate a complex artistic whole in terms of standards derived only from its parts. One might, for instance, judge a novel negatively as being "of uneven quality," by comparing examples of high and low quality writing drawn entirely from its own pages. Nietzsche, however, could respond to this line of argument by pointing out that the analogy is flawed. A critic might find fault with a novel by weighing passages taken from it one against the other, but the ability to do this meaningfully tacitly presupposes familiarity with other literary works. That a whole is evaluable in terms of standards completely internal to it is only an illusion. Implicit appeals to external norms inevitably come into play. To see that this is so, assume that one's taste had been formed entirely by the reading of a single text. One might perhaps manage to estimate the *relative* merit of individual sections, but one would clearly be in no position to form a serious appraisal of the text as a whole. And what Nietzsche is suggesting, with some plausibility, is that none of us is properly placed thus to pass judgment on existence or life:

> Judgments, judgments of value, concerning life, for it or against it, can, in the end, never be true: they have value only as symptoms, they are worthy of consideration only as symptoms; in themselves such judgments are stupidities. One must by all means stretch out one's fingers and make the attempt to grasp this amazing finesse, *that the value of life cannot be estimated.* Not by the living, for they are an interested party, even a bone of contention, and not judges; not by the dead, for a different reason. (TI 2.2)

All ideals—and all ideas—are to some extent products of circumstances without which they could never have been formulated. At first sight, Nietzsche's idea seems to be that since it is life as a whole that makes value judgments possible at all, negative value judgments of life as a whole are in some sense self-defeating, since they call into question their own preconditions. "Should life rule over knowledge and science, or should knowledge rule over life?" he asks in 1874. "Which of these forces is higher and more decisive? No one will doubt: life is the higher, the ruling force; for any knowledge that destroyed life would simultaneously destroy itself" (HL 10).

But a little clarity is called for here. Suppose that one were to argue thus: Since there would be no value judgments in the absence of life, it follows that the judgment "it would be better if there were no life" entails "it would be better if this judgment had not been made," and is therefore self-defeating, and hence false. This argument is plainly fallacious. To say that it would be better if this judgment had not been made does not entail that the judgment is false, merely that it is regrettable that the conditions that had to obtain for it to be made did in fact obtain. For example, it would be better for me if I had not had to make the judgment "I should never have started smoking cigarettes," but obviously that particular judgment could well be true for all that. That a thinker of Nietzsche's stature would not likely fall for such a crude trick should go without saying, but if proof is needed, then it is provided by the fact that Nietzsche ridicules the following excerpt by David Strauss as evincing "truly festive complacency" and "the most untenable sophisms":

> If it is true that things would be better off if the world did not exist…then philosophical thought, which forms a part of this world, would be better off if it did not think. It does not occur to the pessimistic philosopher that, more than anything else, his thought that declares the world to be bad also declares itself to be bad; but if thought that declares the world to be bad is bad thought, then the world, in fact, is good. (qtd. in DS 6)

Of course it is possible, if some kind of error theory applies in this area, that value judgments of life can never be true, and some scholars have read Nietzsche as a kind of error theorist. But to be precise, all that follows from the fact that a judgment is made by an interested party without access to all the relevant information is that we have very good reasons to be skeptical about the status of that judgment, and this seems to be Nietzsche's position on the question of judgments about the value of life: all such value judgments are problematic, in that they are inevitably partial in both senses of the word.[34] Thus, in the 1886 preface to the second volume of *Human, All Too Human,* he writes of his "patient and tedious campaign against the unscientific basic tendency of…romantic pessimism to interpret and inflate individual personal experiences into universal judgments, and, indeed, into condemnations of the world" (5).

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[34] Although Nietzsche is right to condemn Strauss's reasoning as careless and sophistical, a more tentative argument for the claim that negative value judgments about life are especially problematic might be constructed. For suppose that for whatever reason one comes to distrust the forces and processes that are responsible for one's existence and one's constitution. Then one's distrust does seem prone to become reflexive, since one will distrust oneself, and one's judgments—including one's value judgments—as a product of these very forces. "[W]ith me," Darwin wrote in a letter, "the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?" (68). Of course, one ought not to commit the genetic fallacy: a value judgment might well be justified despite its having a questionable provenance. I could, for example, censure somebody out of spite who was nevertheless deserving of such censure. The point is simply that one's confidence in a judgment that has been arrived at unreliably must be established on other grounds.

Nietzsche does not distinguish them, but there are perhaps three distinct senses in which this tendency could be said to be "unscientific" (*unwissenschaftlich*). First, in inflating or exaggerating (*aufbauschen*) on the basis of limited experience, one makes a hasty generalization, which is an error of reasoning. Second, in making an interpretative value judgment, one is thinking non-scientifically—if one understands scientific judgments as value-free—but not necessarily uncritically or fallaciously. (One is thinking hermeneutically, not scientifically; *Geisteswissenschaftlich*, not *Naturwissenschaftlich* in German.) But third, although interpretative value judgments are not necessarily illicit in general, they *are* illicit when they are *universal* judgments, i.e. judgments about the whole. They are unscientific in the sense that dogmatic metaphysics is unscientific for Kant; any claim about existence as a totality is a claim about that which is not a possible object of experience.

Although is unclear exactly which of these senses of the word "unscientific" Nietzsche has in mind in this instance, it is clear enough from the foregoing that he suspects that judgments as to the value of life *in toto* are illogical, unjust and ungrounded. But the issue of life's value for Nietzsche is like that of God's goodness for the skeptical theist. The skeptical theist takes it on faith that God is good, and thus no apparent counterevidence to the claim that God is good is given any weight. And just as the theist is not disposed by nature to adopt a neutral attitude to God despite his transcendence, neither is Nietzsche temperamentally inclined to adopt a dispassionate attitude to unjudgeable life. Thus he takes sides, not as a judge, but as an interested party, as an

"advocate of life [*Fürsprecher des Lebens*]" (Z 3.13.1; BT Preface 5), and praises the kind of person whose faith in life parallels the pious Christian's faith in God:

> Such a spirit who has *become free* stands amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism, in the *faith* that only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole—*he does not negate any more*. Such a faith, however, is the highest of all possible faiths: I have baptized it with the name of *Dionysus*. (TI 9.49)

Nietzsche's Dionysian belief in the redemption of everything in the whole is a faith [*Glaube*] in at least three senses. First, it conforms to the classic Christian definition of faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11.1), since "the whole" is not given as such to beings like ourselves, who participate in it, and partly construct it too. Second, although its content is of course very different, formally it resembles Kantian "moral faith." Kant's "faith in the existence of God and in a future life," is such that he is sure that nothing can shake it, "for that would overturn my moral principles themselves," he writes, "which I cannot renounce without being detestable in my own eyes" (753; CRP A 828/B 856). Nietzsche's "amoral faith" in the goodness of this life is admittedly a little shakier than Kant's, but he cannot renounce his vision either without running the risk of self-contempt. And third, Nietzsche's "joyous and trusting fatalism" is a kind of faith in the Kierkegaardian sense. It is a basic existential orientation towards life, a criterionless passionate commitment which, if he is right, cannot strictly speaking be judged to be either appropriate or inappropriate.

Nietzsche's joyfulness is religious, or spiritual, in just the sense that wonder at the existence of the world is. There is no *objectively appropriate* attitude to take to the fact that there is something and not just nothing. One would like perhaps to say that astonishment is a more appropriate response than indifference, but an "appropriate" response is one that is justified when one finds oneself in a *particular* situation, as opposed to some alternative or other. And to find oneself alive in a world that is "worlding" when for all one knows it might just as well not have done is not to find oneself in any *particular* situation. It is simply to take notice of existence itself, and one's own existence in it. A Zen Buddhist might say that this is at once the most ordinary thing in the world, and the most surprising. By contrast to this surprise at existence, surprise at the discovery that two people in a randomly chosen set of twenty-three shared a birthday would be inappropriate: a result of ignorance of the mathematics of probability, since the chances of such an event are over fifty percent. But since we cannot calculate the odds of a universe's existing, we cannot make a comparable judgment about what attitude a reasonable person ought to take in this case. Either one feels the "pull" of wonder, or one does not; it is not something that one can be argued into mathematically or philosophically, though one may be brought to experience it by other, non-rational, means. Similarly Nietzsche's this-worldly love of life is a dispositional attitude that can be cultivated, rather than a propositional attitude that could be compelled.

One of the main reasons for Nietzsche's stress on the importance of loving life is the premium that he places on creativity; he takes the typically Romantic view that love is among creativity's preconditions:

> [O]nly in love, only in the shadow of the illusion of love, does the human being create—that is, only in the unconditional belief in perfection and justness. Everyone who is forced no longer to love unconditionally has been cut off from the roots of his strength; he cannot help but wither, that is, become dishonest. (HL 7)

Although Nietzsche's views underwent some drastic changes between 1874, when he published this passage, and 1878, when *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* appeared, he makes a very similar claim there: "When a poet is not *in love with* reality his muse will consequently not be reality, and she will then bear him hollow-eyed and fragile-limbed children" (135). With the passing years, Nietzsche tempers this view somewhat. Owing to his many sicknesses, by 1886 his "trust in life is gone: life itself has become a *problem*," for him. "Yet one should not jump to the conclusion that this necessarily makes one gloomy," he cautions. "Even love of life is still possible, only one loves differently. It is the love for a woman that causes doubts in us." And the delight that spirited persons take in everything problematic means that Nietzsche knows "a new happiness" (GS Preface 3). It is this conception of loving life in spite of, or even because of, its difficulties that informs Robert Solomon's view of spirituality as the "thoughtful love of life" (*Spirituality for the Skeptic* passim), and much of Nietzsche's own

"religious" thinking. And by 1888 it appears that Nietzsche has regained his trust: "the instinct of the most spiritual, the Yes-saying instinct" declares that *"[t]he world is perfect,"* he claims in *The Antichrist* (57; italics in orig.).

There are not many advantages that Nietzsche attributes to the "Christian moral hypothesis," but in a note from 1887 he lists among them the fact that "it conceded to the world, in spite of suffering and evil, the character of perfection" (WP 4). Unfortunately, since he does not elaborate further in this note, it is not immediately clear what he is thinking of here, though presumably he has something like Leibniz's theodicy in mind. And yet earlier, in *The Gay Science,* he claimed on the contrary that the "Christian resolve to find the world ugly and bad has made the world ugly and bad" (130), and pitted against this resolve his new year's resolution for 1882: "I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things," he wrote; "then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful"[35] (GS 276). But setting aside the issue of his wavering on Christianity, two things at least are clear: it is aesthetic and spiritual considerations that are ultimately responsible for Nietzsche's approach to the existential problem of suffering; and suffering notwithstanding, his fundamental position is that of an advocate of life. It is this fundamental position, along with the limitations of his sources, that most

[35] Later that year he had to learn this lesson the hard way, after his break with Lou Salomé and Paul Rée turned life itself into a problem for him, as he put it (GS Preface 3), and left him at one of his lowest ebbs ever. "Unless I discover the alchemical trick of turning this—muck into gold, I am lost," he wrote to Franz Overbeck in a letter postmarked December 25. "Here I have the most splendid chance to prove that for me: 'all experiences are useful, all days holy and all people divine'!!!" (The phrase in quotes is an allusion to the passage from Emerson's essay "History" that Nietzsche used as the epigraph to *The Gay Science:* "To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine.") Having written it once, he repeats the last words, with what seems to me to be an ironic and deeply poignant flourish: "All people divine" (SL 199). One can imagine him, pen in hand hovering over the page, as he reflects on his grievances with Lou Salomé and then pulls himself together and forces himself to trace out those lapidary words one more time.

strongly colors Nietzsche's negative assessment of what he takes to be the Buddhist response to suffering, a response, as I shall argue, for which he would have had considerable sympathy if his understanding of it had been more adequate.

4. Nietzsche and the Buddhist View of Suffering

In the chapter "On the Preachers of Death" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche has his alter ego attack the proponents of "renunciation of life." "Yellow the preachers of death wear, or black," he says, indicating that he has in mind Buddhist monks and Christian priests, and he goes on to make a hostile allusion to a legendary episode from the life of the Buddha: "They encounter a sick man or an old man or a corpse, and immediately they say, 'Life is refuted.' But only they themselves are refuted, and their eyes, which see only this one face of existence."[36] Nietzsche, as we have seen, was fully aware of "the suffering inherent in life" (BT 16), and as an advocate of life, he makes various attempts to mitigate the threat that suffering poses to its affirmation, paralleling certain attempts by theists to deal with the problem of evil. Yet although in his early works Nietzsche takes the view that the net balance of hedonic states during the course of a typical human lifetime is negative—quoting approvingly in *Schopenhauer as Educator* his mentor's dictum that "[a] happy life is impossible: the highest thing that a

[36] According to tradition, the young Siddhartha was shielded behind palace walls from the harsh realities of existence, until, upon first venturing outside his palace at the age of twenty-nine, and being confronted with the "four sights"—an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a renunciant—he determined to forsake his life of ease to become a religious mendicant.

human being can attain is a *heroic life"* (4)—in his middle period writings, he makes what seems like a conscious effort to temper this view. Thus in *Human, All Too Human* he claims that "[o]ne can…discover much more happiness in the world than clouded eyes can see: one can do so if one calculates correctly and does not overlook all those moments of pleasure in which every day of even the most afflicted human life is rich"[37] (49). Again, in *Daybreak,* in a section named *"The Slanderers of Cheerfulness,"* he develops these reflections into a peritropic critique of "skeletonism at the feast":

> People who have been deeply injured by life are all suspicious of cheerfulness, as though it were childlike and childish and betrayed a kind of irrationality at the sight of which one can only be moved to pity, as one would be at the sight of a dying child continuing to play with its toys. Such people discover under every rose a disguised and hidden grave; festivities, carousels, joyful music seem to them like the determined self-deception of a man fatally sick determined to consume one last minute of the intoxication of life. But this judgment of cheerfulness is nothing other than its refraction on the dark background of sickness and weariness: it is itself something moving, irrational, inspiring of pity, indeed even something childlike and childish, but deriving from that *second childhood* which succeeds old age and is the forerunner of death. (329)

[37] Immediately preceding the above-quoted sentence, Nietzsche writes the following: "Good-naturedness, friendliness, politeness of the heart are the never-failing emanations of the unegoistic drive and have played a far greater role in the construction of culture than those much more celebrated expressions of it called pity, compassion and self-sacrifice. But usually they are neglected and undervalued; and there is, indeed, very little of the unegoistic in them. The *sum* of these small doses is nonetheless enormous; their collective force is among the mightiest of forces." These sentiments invite comparison with Wordsworth's famous lines in "Tintern Abbey" on "that best portion of a good man's life, / His little, nameless, unremembered, acts / Of kindness and of love."

And in a passage from *The Gay Science* cited above he attempts to envision life not as a tragedy, but as a comedy; dismissing the gloomy worldview of the "veritable cult of suffering" in contemporary Europe (BGE 293) as fatally distorted:

> It seems to me that people always *exaggerate* when they speak of pain and misfortune, as if it were a requirement of good manners to exaggerate here, while one keeps studiously quiet about the fact that there are innumerable palliatives against pain, such as anaesthesia or the feverish haste of thoughts, or a quiet posture, or good or bad memories, purposes, hopes, and many kinds of pride and sympathy that almost have the same effect as anaesthetics——and at the highest degrees of pain one automatically looses consciousness. We know quite well how to drip sweetnesses upon our bitternesses, especially the bitternesses of the soul; we find remedies in our courage and sublimity as well as the noble deliria of submission and resignation. A loss is a loss for barely one hour; somehow it also brings us some gift from heaven——new strength, for example, or at least a new opportunity for strength. (326)

While Nietzsche's claim that a "loss is a loss for barely one hour" is surely false in many cases too obvious to mention, his ideas about the "innumerable palliatives against pain" are both interesting and plausible. But Zarathustra acknowledges that "as deeply as man sees into life, he also sees into suffering" (3.2.1), and Nietzsche's thinking on the problem of suffering takes a darker turn in his darkest book, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where his attempts to drip sweetness on bitterness only leave a bad taste in one's mouth:

> Perhaps in [the past]—the delicate may be comforted by this thought—pain did not hurt as much as it does now; at least that is the conclusion a doctor may arrive at that has treated Negroes (taken as representatives of prehistoric man—) for several internal inflammations that would drive even the best constituted European to distraction—in the case of Negroes they do *not* do so. (The curve of human susceptibility to pain seems in fact to take an extraordinary and almost sudden drop as soon as one has passed the upper ten thousand or ten million of the top stratum of culture; and for my own part, I have no doubt that the combined suffering of all the animals ever subjected to the knife for scientific ends is utterly negligible compared with one painful night of a single hysterical bluestocking.) (2.7)

Nietzsche's praise of the pride, scorn and will power of the "American Indian who, however tortured, repays the torturer with the malice of his tongue" (GS P 3) takes on a different color in light of this racist, sexist, and speciesist passage,[38] which a Marxist, not without some justification, might cite as a paradigm case of nineteenth century European bourgeois false consciousness. Indeed, William A. Preston vilifies Nietzsche on the basis of this text:

> Nietzsche is a cruel racist. This should be directly acknowledged, and his cruelty and racism in no way played down. Upon what basis would Nietzsche consign even "prehistoric men" to the category of laboratory animals? And how really does Nietzsche know that "pain does not hurt as much" to the Negro and to the prehistoric man and to the animal and to all those others who do not have the good fortune to share the top stratum with the hysterical bluestocking? Something other than a logical argument is at work here. (169)

[38] In GS 329 Nietzsche writes of "the ferocity peculiar to the [American] Indian blood."

Preston is undoubtedly correct in maintaining that what is at work in this text is not simply a logical argument: the considerations touched on in this chapter all tend towards supporting that conclusion. And it is an unsettling piece of writing. But it seems to me that, in ignoring context, nuance, and tone, Preston's reading is uncharitable at best. Nietzsche's admittedly insensitive remarks are meant to suggest to those to whom "life itself has become repugnant" (GM 2.7) that it might not involve as much suffering as they imagine. He does not claim really to know that pain hurts certain persons less than others; he only suggests that is it possible that it does. And what he does claim to know—that the sum total of suffering undergone by every vivisected animal is outweighed by the pain felt in one night by a single hysterical *"Bildungs-Weibchen"*—he is clearly being sarcastic about.

Nevertheless it is undeniable that countless oppressors throughout history have sought to justify unjustifiable treatment of nonwhite humans and nonhuman animals by insisting that "*they* don't feel pain the way *we* do"; and countless males have subjugated "the weaker sex" on the pretext of protecting such delicate creatures from harm. "I think the lower classes are less sensitive to pain," muses one of the aristocrats in Luis Buñuel's great satire *The Exterminating Angel;* "Have you ever seen a wounded bull?" she asks, "Not a trace of emotion." One noteworthy thing that the *Genealogy* passage brings out is the degree to which Nietzsche's liberating religious project of "[affirming] the world as it is" (WP 1041) is complicit in reactionary political views. His desire to "[see] the wretched ephemeral babble of politics" (AC P) as beneath himself was arguably shared

both by Jesus and the Buddha—and by many of their respective followers too—and such a lack of political commitment on the part of organized religion has often served by default to legitimate the status quo.[39]

Setting aside questions about the broader political implication of his project however, perhaps Nietzsche can be partly defended against charges of personal cruelty and racism by adducing a few sentences of his own from an 1888 letter to Peter Gast. "I have got into a state of *chronic vulnerability*," he writes, "against which, when my condition is slightly improved, I take a sort of revenge which is not of the nicest description—that is to say, I adopt an attitude of excessive *hardness.* For a proof of this, look at my last work!" namely, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (*Selected Letters*, trans. Ludovici 215).

Meanwhile, in the passage from an 1881 notebook in which he first sketches the eternal recurrence, Nietzsche struggles to come to grips with the implications of recurrence by formulating a "philosophy of indifference":

> But now comes the weightiest knowledge, one which prompts the terrible reconsideration of all forms of life: an absolute surplus of pleasure ***must*** be demonstrable, or else we must choose to destroy ourselves with regard to humanity as a means of destroying humanity. Just this: we have to put the past—our past and that of all humanity—on the scales and *also* outweigh it—no! this piece of human history *will* and must repeat itself eternally; we can leave *that* out of account, we have no influence over it: even if it afflicts our fellow-feeling

[39] In fairness, it ought to be mentioned that contemporary social justice movements such as Catholic liberation theology and Thich Nhat Hanh's engaged Buddhism represent conspicuous counterexamples to the claim that religion is a socially conservative force.

> [*Mitgefühl*] and biases us against life in general. If we are not to be overwhelmed by it, our compassion [*Mitleid*] must not be great. Indifference needs to have worked away deep inside us, and enjoyment in contemplation, too. Even the misery of future humanity must *not* concern us. But the question is whether *we* still *want to live:* and how! (NR 239; NF-1881, 11[141])

Although it is hard to tell what Nietzsche means by choosing to "destroy ourselves with regard to humanity as a means of destroying humanity," it is obvious that he is disturbed by the thought of the endless suffering that recurrence entails. He seems to suggest that either there must be a surplus of pleasure over pain, or the nonexistence of humanity would be preferable. But no sooner does he entertain this thought in writing than he vehemently rejects it with a "no!" A degree of indifference to suffering must be cultivated if one wants to be an advocate of life. In an 1887 note he attacks the argument that since "[t]he sum of displeasure outweighs the sum of pleasure…it would be better if the world did not exist."[40] "I despise this *pessimism of sensibility,"* he writes; "it is itself a sign of deeply impoverished life" (WP 701):

> Whether it is hedonism or pessimism, utilitarianism or eudaemonism——all these ways of thinking that measure the value of things in accordance with *pleasure* and *pain*, which are mere epiphenomena and wholly secondary, are ways of thinking that stay in the foreground and naïvetés on which everyone conscious of *creative* powers and an artistic conscience will look down not without derision, nor without pity. (BGE 225)

[40] This is basically the argument that David Benatar elaborates in his *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence.*

"The 'preponderance of suffering over pleasure' or the opposite (*hedonism*): these two doctrines are already signposts to nihilism," he insists again in 1887; "suffering might predominate, and in spite of that a profound will might exist, a Yes to life" (WP 35). So having endeavored during his middle period to play down the extent to which life is pervaded by suffering, Nietzsche seems finally to return to his default position that even if it is, it can still be affirmed. Thus, to repeat a point made in the previous section, Nietzsche's faith in the goodness of life, like the Christian's faith in the goodness of God, is, so to speak, placed *hors de combat:* the thesis that *life is good* must be maintained despite any evidence there may be to the contrary, even at the cost of undermining its cognitive content by rendering it indeterminate and thus untestable; for it is unclear exactly what Nietzsche means when he quotes Goethe's line "However it may be, life is good" (HAH 222), and unclear too what it would take for him to change his mind in this regard. An so perhaps Nietzschean utterances to the effect that "life is good" or that "the world is perfect" ought to be construed in non-cognitive terms as the expression of an attitude, rather than as the assertion of a belief,[41] and it is this attitude which disposes him falsely to believe that Buddhist "preachers of death" claim that "life is refuted" (Z 1.9).

To understand why the Buddha takes no such position, it is important to realize that, unlike Nietzsche, he does not have an axiology to grind; he does not "[demand] of

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[41] A welcome feature of such a construal is that it serves to distinguish Nietzsche's faith in life from the Christian's faith in God. Since the existence of the intentional object of Nietzsche's faith, unlike that of the Christian's, is not in any doubt, Nietzsche's faith does not commit him to the assertion of any controversial existential propositions, which, with the exception of radical non-realist theologians like Don Cuppitt, the Christian's faith clearly does. One might say that if Nietzsche's faith is non-rational, at least it cannot be dismissed as irrational.

himself a judgment…about life and the value of life" (BGE 205). "Both before and now," the Buddha says, "I declare only suffering and the cessation of suffering" (Holder 115). The Buddha adopts a kind of sober and measured pragmatism, which is similar in some ways to that of Epicurus, a figure who Nietzsche often praises, as he does in this excerpt from *The Wanderer and his Shadow:*

> Epicurus, the soul-soother of later antiquity, had that wonderful insight, which is still today so rarely to be discovered, that to quieten the heart it is absolutely not necessary to have solved the ultimate and outermost theoretical questions. Thus to those tormented by 'fear of the gods' it sufficed him to say: 'if the gods exist they do not concern themselves with us'—instead of indulging in fruitless and distant disputation over the ultimate question whether the gods do in fact exist. (7)

Earlier, in the first volume of *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche himself had made a related point about the practical irrelevancy of metaphysics: "It is true, there could be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it is hardly to be disputed….[But even] if the existence of such a world were never so well demonstrated, it is certain that the knowledge of it would be the most useless [*gleichgültig*] of all knowledge: more useless even than knowledge of the chemical composition of water must be to the sailor in danger of shipwreck" (9). Though this passage has a distinctly Epicurean flavor, what is more remarkable is its striking similarity to a famous parable of the Buddha's by means of which he explains his reluctance to be drawn into metaphysical debates. The Buddha maintains that a person who refused to follow his teachings until he

had gotten satisfactory answers to a long list of speculative questions would be like somebody pierced by a poisoned arrow who refused to have the arrow withdrawn until he was provided with all kinds of detailed information as to who shot the arrow, what kind of bow was used, what the arrow was made from and so on. That person, says the Buddha, would be dead well before all those issues could be settled (Holder 97 – 98).

Like Nietzsche, the Buddha eschews speculative metaphysics; but unlike Nietzsche, he also eschews value theoretical disputation about human existence as a whole. He is neither an advocate nor an accuser of life; he is simply a practitioner of the middle way. That the preachers of death conclude that life is refuted when faced with suffering serves only to show that "they themselves are refuted, and their eyes, which see only this one face of existence," according to Zarathustra (Z 1.9), but the Buddha does not focus exclusively on the negative aspects of the human condition, and he certainly does not "conclude that life is refuted." Buddhism, its adherents insist, is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but realistic. "The Buddha does not deny happiness in life when he says there is suffering," writes Walpola Rahula; "On the contrary he admits different forms of happiness, both material and spiritual, for laymen as well as for monks" (17). The Buddha simply points out what cannot be denied, namely that all of these ordinary forms of happiness are impermanent. Christopher Gowans brings out nicely the spirit of the Buddhist critique of unenlightened existence:

> [People] might be inclined to think that many (if not most) human lives are not so bad, that the positive aspects of life outweigh the negative ones. The Buddha

> would not have been surprised by this response and did not deny that many persons would question his analysis. His point may be illustrated by an analogy: if an alcoholic is told his life is in bad shape, he will probably point out, perhaps correctly, that he has lots of good times; nonetheless, he has a serious problem and could have a far better life without alcohol and the 'good times' it brings. Similarly, the Buddha thought, most of us can point to some positive features of life: he is not saying we are miserable all the time. However, there is something not fully satisfactory about the lives most of us live. We seek enduring happiness by trying to attach ourselves to things that are in constant change. This sometimes brings temporary and partial fulfillment, but [the] long-term result is frustration and anxiety. Because of the impermanence of the world, we do not achieve the real happiness we implicitly seek. The Buddha thought we could all sense the truth of this with a moderate amount of honest reflection on the realities of human life, but he also believed that full understanding of the [nature of suffering] was difficult to achieve and would require significant progress towards enlightenment. (32)

In a note from 1884, Nietzsche labels "world-denying modes of thought" that conceive of "the absolute ugliness of man, existence without God, reason etc." as "pure Buddhism." "I have searched for this extreme form of world-denial," he writes; "'It is all suffering,' it is all lies, what seems good (happiness etc.) And instead of saying 'it is all suffering,' I said it is all the making of suffering, killing, even in the best of people" (qtd. in Mistry 120). It is hard to know what Nietzsche means when he says that "it is all the making of suffering" here. Probably what he has in mind is his recurring amoralistic idea that life is "being cruel and inexorable against everything…that is growing old and weak" (GS 26); that "life itself is *essentially* appropriation, injury, overpowering of what is alien and weaker" (BGE 259). But possibly he intends to draw attention to the fact that

experiences that may not be intrinsically unpleasant are rendered unpleasant by the attitude that one takes to them. Whether the same caress, for example, excites desire or disgust is clearly conditional on one's feelings about the person doing the caressing. A reading along these lines is supported by a passage from *The Gay Science* in which he posits against Schopenhauer this proposition: "when a strong stimulus is experienced as pleasure or displeasure, this depends on the *interpretation* of the intellect which, to be sure, generally does this work without rising to our consciousness: one and the same stimulus can be interpreted as pleasure or displeasure" (127).

Nietzsche expresses related ideas repeatedly in the *Nachlass*, claiming that "in countless cases we first *make* a thing painful by investing it with an evaluation" (WP 260). "All feelings of pleasure and displeasure presuppose a calculation of utility and harmfulness to the whole," he writes elsewhere; "in other words, a sphere where an end (a state) is desired and means for it are selected. Pleasure and displeasure are never 'basic facts'" (WP 669). If this is what Nietzsche means in saying "it is all the making of suffering," then the thesis he proposes "instead of" what he calls "pure Buddhism" is closer to genuine Buddhism than the view that he rejects, and in particular it is related to the claim made in the second Noble Truth about the production of *duḥkha* (suffering) by *tṛṣṇā* (craving). For if Nietzsche believes, as the 1884 note suggests, that the Buddha taught that *all* is suffering, then he is the victim of a common misconception, which David Kalupahana warns against here:

> [T]he Buddha was reluctant to present suffering as a universal or all-inclusive truth. "All or everything is suffering" (*sabbaṃ dukkhaṃ*) is a statement that is conspicuously absent in the early discourses attributed to the Buddha. A general statement about suffering is always concretized by the use of the relative pronoun "this" (*idaṃ*). Thus the most general statement one can find in the discourses reads, "All this is suffering" (*sabbaṃ idaṃ dukkhaṃ*). (*History of Buddhist Philosophy* 86)

For the most part, the Buddha was not in the business of making unqualified assertions about the ultimate nature of reality, but confined his observations to the nature of human experience, and the referent of the pronoun "this" in the phrase "All this is suffering" is not experience as such, but the unsatisfactory experiences that we bring upon ourselves as the result of factors such as unintelligent beliefs, unenlightened desires, and unskillful actions.

5. The Distinction between Suffering and Pain

Another common misconception of Buddhism is to see it as a practice directed at the avoidance of pain; to be more precise, what it does involve is a method of rising above suffering. The distinction between pain and suffering, which is often overlooked, is similar to, and at least as important as, that between pleasure and happiness. A certain amount of pain is inescapable for anybody with a functioning nervous system; Buddhism

is not some kind of philosophical general anesthetic.[42] "Whether the cause possesses consciousness or not, distress is inevitable for embodied beings," writes Śāntideva in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*; "That distress appears in what is conscious. Tolerate that pain therefore" (56). But suffering is more phenomenally complex than pain. It consists not just in certain sensations, but is a negative emotional experience of passivity with respect to these sensations. The pain of exhaustion felt by the marathon runner is very different from the suffering experienced by the refugee in a war zone subjected to a forced march. Suffering, in Buddhism and in Nietzsche's thought (as in Stoicism), also has a critical cognitive dimension: it occurs when pain is interpreted in light of particular beliefs, attitudes, and expectations that only serve to aggravate it. The Buddha brings out the difference between unenlightened and enlightened responses to pain in the following excerpt from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya:*

> The unlearned ordinary person, when touched by an unpleasant feeling, grieves, is wearied, laments, weeps beating one's chest, and becomes confused. Such a person feels two feelings, a bodily one and a mental one. Just as a person might be pierced by a dart and then might be pierced by a second dart. In that case one would feel two feelings from the darts….The learned noble disciple, when touched by an unpleasant feeling, does not grieve, is not wearied, does not lament, does not weep beating one's chest, and does not become confused. Such a person feels only one feeling, a bodily one, but not a mental one. (Holder 92 – 93)

[42] That said, it seems that Buddhist monks do learn techniques that enable them to control or even eliminate pain under certain conditions. See the account of a Bhutanese lama by Alexandra David-Neel in her *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* 15 – 16, reproduced below.

Suffering is thus a kind of second-order reaction to pain: people suffer based on beliefs to the effect that either they themselves or things more generally should not be as they are—that the pain they feel somehow marks them out as either a justly punished sinner, or else as a victim of cosmic injustice. But Buddhism attempts to prevent these evaluations from arising by fostering more positive attitudes to negative hedonic states, such as relaxed inquisitiveness, or even gratitude: "The virtue of suffering has no rival," says Śāntideva; "from the shock it causes, intoxication falls away" (51). Nietzsche, who frequently voices comparable sentiments, is also alive to the fact that we compound our pain in the way the Buddha described using the analogy of the second dart: "To calm the imagination of the invalid, so that at least he should not, as hitherto, have to suffer *more* from thinking about his illness than from the illness itself—that, I think, would be something! It would be a great deal! Do you now understand our task?" (D 54). When one reflects on the degree to which suffering, unlike pain, is actually a *learned* response, it begins to be more plausible to think that it can be *unlearned*. When young children fall and hurt themselves, for example, they often first check the expression on the face of the nearest adult before deciding how to react. There is an instant of wavering where a mother's broad smile as opposed to a look of fright can mean the difference between laughter and tears. "Pain is an *intellectual* occurrence in which a definite judgment is expressed—the judgment *"harmful,"* in which a long experience is summarized," Nietzsche writes, and in certain cases children lack sufficient experience to make such judgments and look to others to do so on their behalf. "There is no pain as such," Nietzsche continues; "It is not being wounded that hurts; but the experience of the bad

consequences being wounded can have for the whole organism expresses itself in that profound shock that is called displeasure"[43] (WP 699).

It might be objected that in claiming that there is no pain as such Nietzsche goes too far, and against my example of learned pain behavior, most parents would attest that babies are well able to cry and sob without any encouragement. These are surely legitimate points, and there are clearly certain sensations which are extremely difficult to evaluate as other than unpleasant. But it is an open question just what degree of "interpretative latitude" conscious subjects enjoy with respect to their sensations, and neither Nietzsche nor the Buddha takes the implausible position that one can invest any stimulus with any evaluation by means of a simple "act of will." Rather, what both claim is that over a period of time one can, by the exercise of self-discipline, modify one's characteristic response to a given stimulus, such that a kind of occurrence that was formerly experienced as disagreeable no longer possesses that valence.

In the *Dhammapada*, for example, the Buddha states that enmity—which is a major source of suffering—will never by quelled by those who brood over grievances, working themselves up with such thoughts as "He reviled me! He struck me! He defeated me! He robbed me!" (Carter and Palihawadana 3). In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* Śāntideva expands on this idea:

[43] The terminological distinction that I am making between pain and suffering is not consistently observed either by Nietzsche or by all Buddhist writers. Perhaps what Nietzsche ought to say here is that *suffering* is intellectual.

> If it is their very nature to cause others distress, my anger towards…fools is as inappropriate as it would be towards fire for its nature to burn. In fact, this fault is adventitious. Beings are by nature pleasant. So anger towards them is as inappropriate as it would be towards the sky if full of acrid smoke. If disregarding the principal cause, such as a stick or other weapon, I become angry with the person who impels it, he too is impelled by hatred. It is better that I hate that hatred. (53)

And, in the pivotal Chan text, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Partriarch,* the role of meditation in ameliorating negative reactive attitudes, and the functioning of such attitudes in the production of *duḥkha* are illuminated in the following wonderful *mondo.*[44] Notice how the master and the student playfully goad each other into increasingly perceptive statements of a central Buddhist theme:

> There was another monk by the name of Shen-hui who was a native of Nan-yang. He came to Mount Ts'ao-ch'i, made obeisance, and asked: "Master, when you are sitting in meditation, do you see or not?" The Master got up and hit Shen-hui three times. Then he asked: "Shen-hui, when I hit you, did it hurt or didn't it?" Shen-hui answered: "It hurt and it also didn't hurt." The Sixth Patriarch said: "I see and I also do not see." Then Shen-hui again asked: "Master, why do you see and not see?" The Master answered: "My seeing is always to see my own errors; that's why I call it seeing. My non-seeing is not to see the evils of people in the world. That's why I see and also do not see. What about your hurting and also not hurting?" Shen-hui said: "If it did not hurt, I would be the same as an

[44] This is a Japanese Zen term that literally means "question and answer." A *mondo* is "a discussion or interview between master and student in which a religious theme is addressed obliquely rather than in the form of a debate or lecture. Normally the student raises a problem in connection with doctrine or practice and the master attempts to provide an answer without recourse to theoretical or analytical explanations" (Keown 180).

> insentient tree or rock. If it did hurt, I would be the same as a common person, and resentments would arise." (Yampolsky 169)

Finally, in her classic work *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, Alexandra David-Neel relates this memorable story of an unnamed Bhutanese anchorite's remarkable powers of fortitude and forbearance:

> One day a pious benefactor came to see the ascetic and left him a sum of money to purchase winter provisions. His disciple, urged on by covetousness, stabbed him and ran off with the silver. The aged lama was still alive, and came to his senses soon after the murderer had gone. His wounds caused him excruciating suffering, and to escape this torture he sank into meditation. Concentration of thought is carried so far by Tibetan mystics that it becomes anaesthetic and they do not feel anything; or at a lower degree of power they can thus greatly lessen their pains. When another disciple of the lama went to visit him a few days later he found him rolled up in a blanket and motionless. The smell from the festering wounds and the blood-stained blanket caught his attention. He questioned his master. The hermit then told him what had happened, but when the man wished to get a doctor from the nearest monastery he was forbidden to do so. "If the lamas and villagers happen to hear about my condition they will search for the culprit," said the ascetic. "He cannot have got far. They would find him and, probably, condemn him to death. I cannot permit this. I wish to give him more time to escape. One day he will, perhaps, return to the right path, and in any case, I shall not have been the cause of his death. So do not tell anyone what you have seen here. Now go, leave me alone. While I meditate, I do not suffer, but when I become conscious of my body my pain is unbearable." An Oriental disciple does not discuss an order of this kind. The man prostrated himself at his

> guru's feet and left. A few days later the hermit, all alone in his hut, passed away.[45] (15 – 16)

If there is one aspect of Buddhism that Nietzsche does recognize, it is the degree to which its adherents (unlike typical Christians as he sees them) are free from debilitating *ressentiment.* The Buddha, he writes in *The Antichrist*, "does not ask his followers to fight those who think otherwise: there is nothing to which his doctrine is more opposed than the feeling of revenge, antipathy, *ressentiment* ('it is not by enmity that enmity is ended'—that is the stirring refrain of all Buddhism)" (20). Later in 1888, in *Ecce Homo*, he quotes approvingly the same verse of the *Dhammapada* again:

> [The Buddha's] "religion" should rather be called a form of *hygiene,* lest it be confused with such pitiable phenomena as Christianity: its effectiveness was made conditional on the victory over *ressentiment.* To liberate the soul from this is the first step toward recovery. "Not by enmity is enmity ended; by friendliness is enmity ended": these words stand at the beginning of the doctrine of the Buddha. It is *not* morality that speaks thus; thus speaks physiology. (EH 1.6)

But Nietzsche's understanding of the importance placed on freedom from *ressentiment* in the Buddhist tradition is selective and inadequate. He claims that the reason that it is proscribed by the Buddha is that it poses such a danger to the weak and the sick:

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[45] David-Neel's reports of her travels in Tibet and elsewhere used to be subject to a measure of skepticism, but contemporary scholars take the view that some of that skepticism may have been sexist in origin, and she is now considered to be generally reliable.

> Nothing burns one up faster than the affects of *ressentiment.* Anger, pathological vulnerability, impotent lust for revenge, thirst for revenge, poison-mixing in any sense—no reaction could be more disadvantageous for the exhausted: such affects involve a rapid consumption of nervous energy, a pathological increase of harmful secretions—for example, of the gall bladder into the stomach. *Ressentiment* is what is forbidden *par excellence* for the sick—it is their specific evil—unfortunately also their most natural inclination. This was comprehended by that profound physiologist, the Buddha. (EH 1.6)

This is true as far as it goes. The Buddha, as we have seen, does warn that by reacting anxiously or angrily to injuries, we only allow ourselves to be pierced by a "second dart." But the offering of prudential reasons for avoiding *ressentiment* is only half the story; more theoretical reasons, as we have also seen, are offered as well: reasons similar to those Nietzsche gives elsewhere, which derive from a deflationary naturalistic conception of human agency. Recall Śāntideva's argument above that anger towards wrongdoers is *inappropriate,* since they are impelled to act as they do by forces over which they lack control. On the Buddhist understanding of *pratītya-samutpāda,* or dependent origination, everything arises in dependence on causes and conditions, and there is no place for the kind of metaphysical freedom that could serve to justify the attribution to persons of the kind of ultimate moral responsibility for their behavior that warrants retributive, as opposed to rehabilitative, punishment. Human nature being what it is, it is almost impossible to rid oneself of certain basic reactive attitudes, but strictly speaking, the Buddhist position would be that to curse a wrongdoer for failing to do right

is as wrongheaded as it seems to have been of Jesus to curse a fig tree for failing to bear fruit out of season.

6. The Self-Overcoming of Suffering

Buddhists, Nietzsche believes, "seek a way of nonexistence and therefore they regard with horror all affective drives. E.g., take no revenge! be no one's enemy!—The hedonism of the weary is here the supreme measure of value" (WP 155). Buddhist "hygienic measures," he maintains, are intended for persons with a certain physiological makeup: "*first,* an excessive sensitivity, which manifests itself in a refined susceptibility to pain; and *second,* an overspiritualization, an all-too-long preoccupation with concepts and logical procedures, which has damaged the instinct of personality by subordinating it to the impersonal.'"[46] The Buddha, in Nietzsche's view, seeks to cure the resulting "depression" and "spiritual exhaustion" by insisting that his followers attend to their own wellbeing: "In the Buddha's doctrine, egoism becomes a duty: the 'one thing needful,' the question 'how can *you* escape from suffering?' [*wie kommst du vom Leiden los*] regulates and limits the whole spiritual diet" (AC 20). But this characterization of Buddhism as a form of hedonism that offers an escape from suffering to the weary is a caricature. Buddhism is not some *"religion of comfortableness"* (GS 338; ital. in orig.)

[46] To this diagnosis of the type of person to whom Buddhism appeals Nietzsche appends an intriguing parenthesis in the form of an indirect confession. Excessive sensitivity and overspiritualization, he notes, are "both states which at least some of my readers, those who are 'objective' like myself, will know from experience."

The aim of Buddhist praxis is not the avoidance of suffering, but rather its overcoming, or even its self-overcoming, to use a Nietzschean idiom. In *Schopenhauer as Educator*, Nietzsche writes of profound human beings who "possess the strength to turn the sting of suffering against themselves and understand their existence metaphysically" (5), and this is just what Buddhists aspire to, although of course their understanding of existence is not metaphysical in quite the sense that Nietzsche has in mind in that early work. In short, what the Buddha sought, and is said to have found, was not a way out of suffering, but a way through. And whereas enmity is not ended by enmity, the contrary can be true of suffering more generally. The path of the bodhisattva certainly involves suffering, but that is as it should be, since this "limited suffering [is] the means to perfect Buddhahood." It is "like the pain of extraction when getting rid of the agony of an embedded thorn," explains Śāntideva, making use of a traditional analogy (69).

Zarathustra highlights the human tendency to confront distress with a display of bravado: "Man…is the most courageous animal: hence he overcame every animal. With playing and brass he has so far overcome every pain." But whether such a strategy will succeed with the existential anguish attendant on the human condition as such is doubtful, for "human pain is the deepest pain," and Zarathustra admits that his own encomium on courage itself contains "much playing and brass" (3.2.1). Perhaps what is needed to come to terms with the human predicament is not audacity or attitudinizing, but as Walpola Rahula puts it, "the understanding of the question of suffering, how it comes about, and how to get rid of it, and then [the willingness] to work accordingly with patience, intelligence, determination and energy" (28).

Nietzsche's praise in *The Gay Science* of the American Indian who pits his pride, scorn, and will power against his pain, and "however tortured, repays his torturer with the malice of his tongue" was noted above; he contrasts this response to that of the person who "[withdraws] from pain into that Oriental Nothing—called Nirvana—into mute, rigid, deaf resignation, self-forgetting, self-extinction" (P 3). But as Zarathustra points out in Nietzsche's next book, the alternatives presented by the fight or flight response do not exhaust our resources for dealing with distress; there is a third option open to us of turning felt distress to our advantage: "if you have an enemy, do not requite him evil with good…Rather prove that he did you some good" (1.19). Nietzsche's agonistic model of self-cultivation means that a "profound appreciation of the value of having enemies" is a theme to which he frequently returns; he refers to it as the "spiritualization of *hostility"* (TI 5.3; ital. in orig.). Śāntideva similarly observes that just as needy persons are not obstacles to generosity, but opportunities to exercise it, antagonists ought properly to be thought of a means to spiritual growth:

> Beggars [who represent an opportunity to exercise generosity] are easy to find in this world, but those who will cause harm [and thus make possible the practice of forbearance] are not, because, if I do no wrong, no one wrongs me. Therefore, since he helps me on the path to Awakening, I should long for an enemy like a treasure discovered in the home, acquired without effort. (61)

Śāntideva's receptiveness to the uses of adversity is a virtue as characteristically Buddhist as it is Nietzschean. "When you encounter suffering, do not be distressed,"

runs a quotation from a sutra in a text attributed to Bodhidharma, the first Chan ancestor. "Why? Because your consciousness opens up to the fundamental" (qtd. in Foster and Shoemaker 4). This reminds one of the kind of comments Nietzsche makes about great pain's making one more profound (GS P 3), but some remarkable sayings of a contemporary of Nietzsche's, the great nineteenth century Korean Sŏn [Zen] master Kyong Ho, evince an even closer affinity:

> Don't wish for perfect health. In perfect health there is greed and wanting. So an Ancient said, "Make good medicine from the suffering of sickness." Don't hope for a life without problems. An easy life results in a judgmental and lazy mind. So an Ancient once said, "Accept the anxieties and difficulties of this life." Don't expect your practice to be always clear of obstacles. Without hindrances the mind that seeks enlightenment may be burnt out. So an Ancient once said, "Attain deliverance in disturbances." Don't expect to practice hard and not experience the weird. Hard practice that evades the unknown makes for a weak commitment. So an Ancient once said, "Help hard practice by befriending every demon." (Mu Soeng 172 – 3)

If anybody ever made good medicine from the suffering of sickness, then Nietzsche, who was "very conscious of the advantages that [his] fickle health [gave him] over all robust squares" surely did (GS P 3). In the epilogue to his last work, *Nietzsche Contra Wagner*, which he completed on Christmas day of 1888, just two weeks before his breakdown, he writes that "[o]nly great pain is the ultimate liberator of the spirit" and

says that he owes his philosophy to his "long sickness"[47] (1). His life, as is well known, was beset with those difficulties and disturbances that Kyong Ho urges us to accept, and as for "befriending demons," that, of course, is precisely what he does in embracing his most abysmal thought: the eternal recurrence.[48] Earlier in 1888, in *Ecce Homo*, having related his almost complete neglect by his contemporaries, Nietzsche insists—perhaps not wholly convincingly—that he is not embittered on this account. "I myself have never suffered from all this," he writes, "what is *necessary* does not hurt me" (EH CW 4). The indifference to praise and blame to which Nietzsche aspires is also regarded as a virtue in Buddhism; it is one of the aspects of *upekṣā,* or equanimity, which in turn is one of the four *brahmavihāras*, or "divine abodes." But these and many other genuine points of contact tend to go unnoticed by Nietzsche on account of the inadequacy of his sources and the distorting effect of his own preoccupations, and thus he frequently falls into the error of dismissing Buddhism as a religion of mere comfort and consolation.

Nietzsche's claim that what is necessary does not hurt him merits a few brief remarks. He has difficulty deciding whether and when suffering demeans or dignifies the sufferer. For the most part, he interprets susceptibility to distress as a sign of weakness. In *Daybreak,* for example, he writes that if we discover that somebody whom we revere is suffering, the thought that perhaps we can be of help tends to narrow the gap between us, from which he takes it to follow that "even in the most favorable case, there is

[47] The epilogue to *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* is actually a reworking of the third and fourth sections of the preface to *The Gay Science* from which the first quotation in this paragraph is taken.

[48] The idea of the eternal recurrence is first presented in *The Gay Science* section 341, where Nietzsche imagines a demon expounding it. "Would you curse that demon, or call it a god?" he asks, apparently using the second person pronoun to address this question simultaneously to his reader and to himself.

something degrading in suffering" (138). But in *Beyond Good and Evil* he writes that "[p]rofound suffering makes noble; it separates," and remarks that "it almost determines the order of rank *how* profoundly human beings can suffer" (270). In book five of *The Gay Science,* in a section on romanticism that he later revised for inclusion in *Nietzsche Contra Wagner,* he makes a distinction between "two kinds of sufferers" that could be construed as an attempt to resolve this tension: there are Dionysian characters—like Nietzsche, one imagines—"who suffer from the *over-fullness of life"* and romantics like Schopenhauer and Wagner who suffer from its impoverishment (370). If, as he claims in the *Genealogy,* what "really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering" (3.7), then presumably Dionysian sufferers are less likely to succumb here, since suffering presents them with an opportunity to exercise their strength, and thus to make sense of their misfortune.

But perhaps the very urge to make sense of suffering is itself a sign of some kind of deficiency, a vestige of ages during which it was interpreted as indicating guilt or divine disfavor; interpretations which, as Nietzsche was at pains to point out, only succeed in making matters worse. Perhaps the most intelligent response to suffering, and the first step to loosening its grip, is simply to acknowledge it for what it is, neither more nor less; a possibility to which Buddhism, as Nietzsche recognizes, is very much alive. Notice how, in the following passage, when he compares the barbarian's psychology unfavorably to the Buddhist's, he does so partly—and possibly self-consciously—at his own expense:

> Buddhism…is no longer confronted with the need to make suffering and the susceptibility to pain *respectable* by interpreting them in terms of sin—it simply says what it thinks: "I suffer." To the barbarian, however, suffering as such is not respectable: he requires an exegesis before he will admit to himself that he is suffering (his instinct would sooner direct him to deny his suffering and bear it in silence). (AC 23)

Furthermore, although Buddhism is distinguished from other world religions by the fact that the basic problem that it addresses is the problem of suffering—as opposed to the problem of sin in Christianity, or that of social chaos in Confucianism, for example[49]—it should be clear in light of the foregoing discussion that Buddhist discourse about escaping from suffering needs to be interpreted with some caution; not least because unskillful attempts to escape from suffering often just compound it on the Buddhist understanding. Indeed Nietzsche's reference to the Buddhist "struggle against *suffering* [*Kampf gegen das* Leiden]" early in section 20 of *The Antichrist* is arguably closer to the mark than his reference later in the same section to the "egoistic" project of answering the question "how can *you* escape from suffering [*wie kommst* du *vom Leiden los*]," with the proviso that—especially in Mahāyāna Buddhism—the struggle in question needs to be carried out using *upāya-kauśalya* (or "skillful means"), and bearing in mind also the fact that Chan and Zen Buddhists in particular espouse a principle similar to the

[49] In *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World—and Why Their Differences Matter,* Stephen Prothero opposes the view associated with authors like Huston Smith that the world religions basically offer different paths to the same goal, and delineates divergent traditions in terms of the varying felt predicaments that each is intended to solve.

paradox of hedonism, according to which struggling directly against suffering is likely to be self-defeating.

In short, rather than saying that Buddhists attempt to escape from suffering, what one ought to say is that they undertake an arduous process of self-transformation in which the purpose is to become the kind of person who no longer suffers in circumstances that less enlightened people would find intolerable. Buddhists do not—at least not in any superficial or short term way—simply seek to make things easier for themselves; rather what they seek to do is to transcend suffering by means of suffering itself, to "[live] through the whole of [it], to the end, leaving it behind, outside [themselves]," as Nietzsche claims in a late note to have done himself with respect to nihilism (WP P 3). What Buddhists aim at, in other words, to say it again, is the self-overcoming of suffering.

Having considered some points of contact between Nietzsche's view and the Buddhist view of the appropriate response to one's own suffering, it is necessary now to touch more directly on the question of how one ought to respond to the suffering of others. Compassion is of course a fundamental Buddhist virtue, especially in the Mahāyāna, but Nietzsche is notorious for having argued that it ought rather to be classified as a vice. In the remaining sections of this chapter, I will summarize Nietzsche's critique of compassion, attempt to outline some possible responses to his most pressing criticisms, and consider the question of the extent to which they apply to compassion in Buddhism. While allowing what nobody with even a passing knowledge of Nietzsche and Buddhism can deny—that there are important differences between them

on the issue of compassion—I will conclude that, here as elsewhere, there are genuine similarities that ought not to be overlooked.

7. Nietzsche's Critique of Compassion

Before we proceed to Nietzsche's case against compassion, a few clarificatory remarks are in order. The German word that Nietzsche uses most often for what I am here calling compassion is *Mitleid.* Kaufmann and others have translated this as "pity," but since I want to avoid the negative connotations that this term has acquired I have occasionally substituted "compassion" for "pity" in the translations I use below. Nietzsche also uses a number of related words whose meanings—like their English equivalents "sympathy," "empathy" etc.—are not always clearly distinguished in general usage. In those instances where it appears that anything of importance hangs on the specific phrasing chosen, I give the German original in brackets.

A preliminary definition of compassion would also be helpful at this stage. Aristotle, in his *Rhetoric,* provides a very plausible account of the "cognitive structure" of this emotion, which Martha Nussbaum summarizes thus:

> Pity [or compassion; *eleos* in Greek] is a painful emotion directed at another person's pain or suffering. It requires, and rests upon, three beliefs: first, the belief that the suffering is significant rather than trivial; second, the belief that the suffering was not caused by the person's own fault; and third, the belief that

> one's own possibilities are similar to those of the sufferer, that the suffering shows things "such as might happen in human life. (141)

Later I will take up the question whether the Aristotelian analysis of what the Greeks called *eleos* can be applied to the corresponding Buddhist virtue of *karuṇā,* but it does seem to be more or less applicable to *Mitleid,* and it is the charges that Nietzsche brings against *Mitleid* that I want to examine first. For ease of exposition, his case may be broken down into three main allegations: first, that compassion is caught up with cruelty; second, that it is both contemptuous and contemptible; and third, and most importantly for our purposes, that it makes suffering contagious. I will now set out each criticism—along with some suggestions as to how a Buddhist might respond to it—in turn.

Nietzsche's first point can be understood as a particular instance of what for him is a characteristic general claim: many traits that we judge to be virtues are not antithetical to their corresponding vices, but are actually subtle refinements of them. Thus a certain kind of compassion is not the opposite of cruelty, but is quite closely related to it, and may even contain an element of cruelty at its core. "What constitutes the painful voluptuousness of tragedy is cruelty; what seems agreeable in tragic pity, and at bottom in everything sublime, up to the highest and most delicate shudders of metaphysics, received its sweetness solely from the admixture of cruelty," he writes (BGE 229). "Cruelty has been refined to tragic pity, so that it is denied the name of cruelty" (WP 312). We cannot admit to ourselves that we enjoy the spectacle of

another's suffering, so we fool ourselves into believing that the pleasure we feel derives from the virtuous reaction of compassion that the suffering evokes in us.

As usual, Nietzsche is a penetrating psychologist here, but perhaps more surprisingly Buddhist psychologists are equally alert to the danger of self-deception in circumstances where we are faced with the suffering of others:

> To the natural man the suffering of his fellow-creatures is not altogether repellent, and somehow seems to positively attract him. The popular newspapers would not devote so much space to calamities if their readers were less avid to read about earthquakes, wars, murders, traffic accidents, atrocities, and so on. Psychologically speaking, compassion is closely allied to cruelty—which can be defined as the pleasure derived from contemplating the suffering of others. The two are the reverse and the obverse of the same medal. Both the compassionate and the cruel are sensitive to the suffering of others, and keen on watching it. The compassionate derive pain, the cruel pleasure form what they see. But the division between pleasure and pain is not at all clear and unambiguous; in masochistic pleasure the two are inextricably interwoven; and in addition we are endowed with so striking a capacity for self-deception that our true motives can rarely be ascertained with any degree of certainty. It is, as a matter of fact, possible for a man to be secretly drawn to the calamities of the world, and to derive, largely unknown to himself, a hidden satisfaction from gloating over them, which he genuinely believes to be actuated by pity. That is one of the reasons why Buddhism insists that the practice of friendliness should precede the development of compassion. For it is the function of friendliness to purify the heart of hatred and ill-will, both manifest and latent. (Conze 86 – 87)

The "practice of friendliness" to which Edward Conze refers above is the first of an important set of structured meditational exercises aimed at developing certain

fundamental virtues. "Friendliness" is the virtue of *maitrī,* the first of the four *Brahma-vihāras,* meaning literally "abodes of Brahma," or more loosely divine states. The full list comprises *maitrī,* or loving-kindness; *karuṇā,* or compassion; *muditā,* or sympathetic joy; and *upekṣā,* or equanimity, in that order. *Maitrī* is a disposition to bring about the happiness of others, as distinguished from *karuṇā,* which is a disposition to alleviate suffering, and one reason that the virtue of *maitrī* is cultivated first, as Conze points out, is to protect against the danger of indulging in unconscious cruelty which attention to suffering involves. In the *Visuddhimagga* of Buddhaghoṣa, one is instructed to practice directing *maitrī* first at oneself, and then by successive stages at friends, strangers, enemies, and eventually all beings. Only when one has attained the virtue of benevolence to a certain degree should one focus on developing compassion. So in short, to Nietzsche's charge that compassion may well contain an element of cruelty, the Buddhist would reply that it certainly may, but that with care, this element can be removed.

Nietzsche's second criticism is that compassion is typically both contemptible and contemptuous, an emotion that is unworthy of strong persons, and that indicates only disrespect for those at whom it is directed. In his respect, his understanding of compassion as a distancing attitude departs most from Aristotle's. In *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche claims that "[a]ll un-spirituality, all vulgar commonness, depend on an inability to resist a stimulus: one *must* react, one follows every impulse" (8.6), and accordingly he sees the inability to remain unmoved by the suffering of another as a particular manifestation of the general decadence that he deplores. "Almost everywhere in Europe today, we find a pathological sensitivity and receptivity to pain; also a

repulsive incontinence in lamentation, an increase in tenderness that would use religion and philosophical bric-a-brac to deck itself out as something higher—there is a veritable cult of suffering," he complains (BGE 293). "Some have dared to call pity a virtue," he writes in *The Antichrist*; "in every *noble* ethic it is considered a weakness" (7), and in *Daybreak* he uncharacteristically calls Kant to his defense, noting that "he expressly teaches that we must be insensible towards the suffering of others if our beneficence is to possess moral value"[50] (132). Men without pity, Nietzsche writes, are "mostly more accustomed to enduring pain than are men of pity; and since they themselves have suffered, it does not seem to them so unfair that others should suffer" (D 133). To be unwilling to undergo a certain amount of suffering indicates a low estimation of one's own resources of strength; by the same token, to be unwilling to allow another to suffer is indicative of condescension. Thus "[t]o savages the idea of being pitied evokes a moral shudder: it divests one of all virtue. To offer pity is as good as to offer contempt: one does not want to see a contemptible creature suffer, there is no enjoyment in that" (D 135).

It is clear that Nietzsche is again onto something here, but it is just as clear that he goes too far. Nobody but the most extreme Stoic would consider it a weakness, for example, *genuinely* to commiserate with a loved one who has lost somebody close to him or her. Such a conclusion would seem to depend on a crude understanding of strength as complete insensitivity. But just as one cannot tell simply from an enumeration of its

[50] Incidentally, Kant scholars argue that popular readings along these lines of his view of the role of the affects in the moral life are oversimplified.

properties whether an entity is "good" unless one knows what *kind* of entity it is—a good knife is sharp, while a good club is blunt—it seems that the word "strong" is context dependent too, and the properties in virtue of which a telescope, for example, might be strong in one sense (magnification power), may serve to make it weak in another (breakability). Arguably, among the qualities that strong human beings have is the courage to make themselves vulnerable in certain ways by nurturing a degree of sensitivity. And to be fair to Nietzsche, he was eminently aware of this. "After all," he writes, "one should not demand of what is noblest of all that it should have the durable toughness of leather" (BT 21).

As for his claim that compassion is a sign of condescension, admittedly there are few people today who would be grateful to be told that one felt sorry for them, and the expression "I pity you" in current usage can only be construed as an insult. But again, like the claims that it is a sign of cruelty and weakness, that compassion shows contempt is only sometimes true; it can also be an affirmation of our cohumanity. It seems to me that Nietzsche's position on this question is at best eccentric, if not slightly pathological. "Our personal and profoundest suffering is incomprehensible and inaccessible to almost everyone; here we remain hidden from our neighbor, even if we eat from one pot," he writes. "But whenever people *notice* that we suffer, they interpret our suffering superficially. It is the very essence of the emotion of pity that it strips away from the suffering of others whatever is distinctively personal" (GS 338). What Nietzsche is taking issue with here is the third of the Aristotelian preconditions for compassion, "the belief that one's own possibilities are similar to those of the sufferer." Naturally geniuses

of his caliber wrestle with difficulties that others may only poorly understand, and even those of us struggling with more commonplace problems may be offended to be told "I know just how you feel," for there is a kind of bumbling and intrusive solicitude that is indeed unwelcome to anybody with any self-respect. "If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good," Thoreau memorably averred, "I should run for my life…for fear that I should get some of his good done to me,—some of its virus mingled with my blood" (328).[51] On the other hand though, a strong case could be made for the view that basic existential aspects of the human condition to which all of us are subject, such as old age, illness, perplexity, loss, and death are the source of everybody's profoundest suffering, regardless of distinctions; and mildly paradoxically, one of the things that we all have in common is the fact that there is a sense in which each of us is finally alone.

Notice how Nietzsche's distrust of compassion mirrors the distrust of language that he expresses in an unpublished note. "Compared with music all communication by words is shameless," he writes; "words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common" (WP 810). In each case, it is Nietzsche's hyper-individualism that is at work. The notion that to express an insight is inevitably to betray it is a common theme in Romantic literature, and it is one that Nietzsche repeatedly sounds. This conceit—in both senses of the word—is one of many that he shares with the archetypal *Sturm und Drang* protagonist, the gifted and impassioned but alienated

[51] It is interesting that the misanthropic Thoreau, as does Nietzsche, writes metaphorically of compassion as a contagion.

Werther. "I am…disturbed to find," complains Werther in Goethe's novel, that "[the prince] values my mind and abilities more highly than my heart, which is my only source of pride, and indeed of everything, all my strength and happiness and misery. The things I know, anyone can know—but my heart is mine and mine alone" (*The Sorrows of Young Werther* 86). Nietzsche valued his intellect more highly than Werther did, but if anything, he valued his "philosophic sensibility" more highly yet. "I have not heard of a single intelligent utterance about [*Beyond Good and Evil*]," he complains to Georg Brandes, "much less of an intelligent sentiment….Not a soul has experienced the same sort of thing as I have. I never meet anyone who has been through a thousandth part of the same passionate struggle" (*Selected Letters,* trans. Ludovici 324). Like Nietzsche, Werther occasionally likes to partake of the company of "the folk," but he too is all too conscious of the "pathos of distance" (BGE 257) between them: "When at times I forget myself and, together with them, enjoy the pleasures that are still available to mankind…it has a very good effect on me; but then I must be certain not to think of those many powers lying dormant in me, mouldering in disuse, which I must needs keep carefully concealed. Ah, it trammels the heart so.—And still! to be misunderstood is my fate" (Goethe 29). Werther's tone is a little more lyrical than Nietzsche's typically is, but the sentiments expressed are similar.

Undoubtedly, there is a large measure of truth to Nietzsche's repeated complaint that he is ignored and misunderstood, yet it is arguable that both Nietzsche and Werther first increase in imagination the distance between themselves and others, and then go on to increase it in reality as a result; and Nietzsche is surely prone to indulging in a measure

of Romantic posturing and perverse self-congratulation. ("My triumph is precisely the opposite of Schopenhauer's: I say, *'non legor, non legar'* [I am not read, I *will* not be read]" (EH 3.1).) His insistence on the utter uniqueness of his own experiences sometimes reminds one of the spectacle of the adolescent whose absolute assurance that *nobody* has ever been in love the way *he* has incites a wry smile in those who know better, and presumably, one reason for his popularity among adolescents is this intermittently mawkish quality of his sensibility. While there are very few people endowed with gifts comparable to Nietzsche's, or possessed of the strength of will it took him to put them to the use he did, it seems that there are many who can identify at least to some extent with the kinds of experiences that he articulates better than they themselves ever could, and ironically, it might have been closer to the truth if he had said of *his* words that they make the common *uncommon.*

In any event, in response to Nietzsche's second criticism, it could be said by way of summing up that only from the perspective of an implausible hyper-individualism could it appear that compassion is always contemptible and contemptuous, and that Buddhists may well be closer to the mark than Nietzsche in claiming that there is less that separates us from each other than we suppose. "Many do not realize that/ We here must die./ For those who realize this,/ Quarrels end," as the *Dhammapada* has it (Fronsdal 2; 1.6).

Third, and perhaps most significantly, Nietzsche alleges that through compassion "the suffering of others infects us" (WP 368), and thus ironically that its actual effect is the opposite of its intended one, namely suffering's *relief.* He typically makes this point

by foregrounding the etymological connection between the German word for suffering, *Leid,* and the word *Mitleid,* which literally means (as of course does the Latinate "compassion") "suffering with":

> Compassion (*Mitledien*), insofar as it really causes suffering (*Leiden*)—and this is here our only point of view—is a weakness, like every losing of oneself through a *harmful* affect. It *increases* the amount of suffering in the world: if suffering is here and there indirectly reduced or removed as a consequence of compassion, this occasional and on the whole insignificant consequence must not be employed to justify its essential nature, which is, as I have said, harmful….He who for a period of time made the experiment of intentionally pursuing occasions for compassion in his everyday life and set before his soul all the misery available to him in his surroundings would inevitable grow sick and melancholic. (D 134)

The basic idea here is obvious. If *X* feels bad about *Y's* feeling bad, then two people feel bad instead of one. Thus, in the words of Clothilde de Veaux that Nietzsche quotes approvingly, "*Il est indigne des grand coeurs de répandre le trouble qu'ils ressentent* [It is unworthy of great hearts to pour out the confusion they feel]" (qtd. in TI 9.46). But Nietzsche's claim that the reduction of suffering as a result of compassion is indirect, occasional, and insignificant is highly implausible, given the number of counterexamples that could easily be brought against it; and his argument that compassion makes suffering contagious, along with the most natural response to it, was anticipated by Śāntideva: "You may argue: compassion causes us so much suffering, why force it to arise? Yet when one sees how much the world suffers, how can this suffering

from compassion be considered great? If the suffering of one ends the suffering of many, then one who has compassion for others and himself must cause that suffering to arise" (97). In short, the intensity of suffering caused by compassion is insignificant compared to that of the suffering that evokes it, and that compassion serves to allay.

8. The Buddhist Virtue of *Karuṇā*

Yet if Nietzsche's argument that compassion is inefficacious is weak, his broader point about the danger of dwelling on the amount of misery in the world is not as easily rebutted, and indeed Śāntideva acknowledges elsewhere that "[j]ust as no bodily pleasure at all can gladden the mind of one whose body is engulfed in flames, so too those full of compassion cannot come near to feeling joy when living beings are in distress" (61). And then of course, since there are always living beings that are in distress, it becomes hard to understand how a person who is full of compassion can ever feel joy. "To contemplate so much pain and affliction as this world actually and manifestly contains is bound to depress the mind," as Edward Conze notes. "It seems quite a hopeless task to remove this vast mass of suffering, and helpless despair threatens to paralyse the will to help" (86). In light of these difficulties, Nietzsche's contention that "the ever spreading morality of pity" that he thinks has made philosophers like Schopenhauer ill is "the most sinister symptom of a European culture that [has] itself become sinister" becomes more understandable, as does his worry that it represents a "by-pass to a new Buddhism…for Europeans," or in other words, to nihilism (GM P 5). But in "The Place of Joy in a

World of Fact" Arne Naess boldly suggests that there is a cure for this paralysis of the will, insisting that "there is no good reason to feel sad about [the world's misery]," and that such sadness "is a sign of immaturity, the immaturity of unconquered passiveness and lack of integration":

> The remedy (or psychotherapy) against sadness caused by the world's misery is to do something about it. I shall refrain from mentioning Florence Nightingale, but let me note that Gandhi loved to care for, wash, and massage lepers; he simply enjoyed it. It is very common to find those who deal with extreme misery to be more than usually cheerful. According to Spinoza, the power of an individual is infinitely small compared with that of the entire universe, so we must not expect to save the whole world. The main point—which is built into the basic conceptual framework of Spinoza's philosophy—is that of activeness. By interacting with extreme misery, one gains cheerfulness. (125)

Naess contends here that although compassion considered purely as an *affect* can be harmful, compassionate *action* can alleviate the suffering of both the carer and the cared for. It is plainly an empirical question whether he is right, and the evidence appears to be on his side. "Thinking of the ordinary unpretentious men and women who seem to find special happiness in working for the relief of suffering," writes Philippa Foot, "one must surely find Nietzsche's views on compassion rather silly" (107). Indeed, it could be argued that by repressing his spontaneous compassion for suffering humanity under the banner of a fight against decadence—and his frequent outbreaks of disgust might be read as symptoms of this repression—Nietzsche only makes things worse for himself. He compounds his suffering and alienation, and—more importantly perhaps from his

perspective—depletes his vitality in the attempt to preserve it. Ironically enough, given Nietzsche's view of compassion as a kind of contagion, there is even a significant body of recent clinical evidence that points to a link between the development of compassion and improved immune system functioning (Gilbert 10 – 11).

"'How can you touch someone whose body is covered with lesions?' 'Isn't it difficult to be around so much pain and suffering?'…'What kind of gratification is there in doing this kind of work when the outcome is death?'" are among the litany of questions that Buddhist hospice caregiver Joan Halifax says have been put to her over the years. In *Being with Dying*, she attempts to respond to questions like the foregoing:

> In the beginning it wasn't easy. It did not come naturally or instinctively. Working so closely with death often scared me; I was afraid I might get what the dying person had. When I recognized, however, that I already have what dying people have—mortality—I stopped being afraid of catching it. Recognizing this very interconnectedness is the ground of giving no fear, and the beginning of compassion…Zen uses the [image] of the iron man…to describe giving no fear. The iron man—or iron woman—embodies compassion through unshakeable strength and equanimity…He's not attached to outcome, and has absolutely no interest in offering consolation—he expresses love without pity….He puts himself into a difficult position and is strengthened by it as he offers strength to it. (25)

Bearing in mind what Naess, Foot, and Halifax have to say, one can see that there are important differences between compassion on Aristotle's analysis and the kind of compassionate action that is typical of the practiced caregiver. Recall that for Aristotle,

compassion is a painful other-directed emotion, which rests on the belief that the other's suffering is both significant and undeserved, and is of a kind that poses a threat to the sympathizer. In compassionate action, the emotional component is far less pronounced—one sympathizes, or feels *for* the other, without necessarily empathizing, or feeling *with* him or her—and though beliefs about the significance and commonality of the suffering are likely to be present to some extent, the question of desert is not so relevant. My claim is that the Buddhist virtue of *karuṇā*—the disposition to alleviate suffering—is more like compassionate action than Aristotelian compassion, and that to the extent that this is true, Nietzsche's fears about the enervating effects of Buddhism are misplaced.

In one of the major Mahāyāna texts, the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa sūtra*, the hero Vimalakīrti distinguishes the kind of ineffective and unwise sentimental compassion [*anunayadṛṣṭikaruṇā*, lit. "compassion of emotional conviction"] that Nietzsche worries would make a person ill and gloomy without alleviating suffering from the great compassion [*mahākaruṇā*] that typifies the bodhisattva:

> The sick bodhisattva should tell himself: "Just as my sickness is unreal and nonexistent, so the sicknesses of all living beings are unreal and nonexistent." Through such considerations, he arouses the great compassion toward all living beings without falling into any sentimental compassion. The great compassion that strives to eliminate the accidental passions does not conceive of any life in living beings. Why? Because great compassion that falls into sentimentally purposive views only exhausts the bodhisattva in his reincarnations. But the great compassion which is free of involvement with sentimentally purposive views does not exhaust the bodhisattva in all his reincarnations. He does not reincarnate through involvement with such views but reincarnates with his mind

> free of involvement. Hence, even his reincarnation is like a liberation. (Thurman 46)

Bernard Faure points to a "paradox of Buddhist compassion" in his *Unmasking Buddhism:* "compassion, in principle, is a passion, and the practice of Buddhism is supposed to eradicate passion of all kinds. How is it possible, then, to 'suffer with'…and for other beings, which are essentially illusory, while at the same time remaining detached, 'impassive'?" (90). How, in short, is it possible that an enlightened Buddha, who is supposed to be free from suffering, can exhibit compassion? The above passage from the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa sūtra* is intended to resolve this difficulty by explaining that the kind of compassion that bodhisattvas (and Buddhas) exhibit is an active disposition, not a passive affect. It is manifested in *upāya,* or skillful means—"potent and efficacious techniques" designed to remove "the troubles of living beings" (Thurman 161)—and integrated with *prajñā,* or insight into the impermanent and conditioned nature of reality: "Wisdom [*prajñā*] integrated with liberative technique [*upāya*] consists of being motivated by the great compassion and thus of concentration on cultivation of the auspicious signs and marks, on the adornment of the buddha-field, and on the work of development of living beings" (Thurman 47). There is no mention here of "feeling sorry" for the suffering of other beings.

It is remarkable how many parallels can be drawn between the view of compassion set forth in this sutra and some of Nietzsche's own views. I claimed above that the goal of Buddhism is the self-overcoming of suffering, or the employment of

one's suffering as a method of transforming oneself into the kind of person who no longer suffers from that which previously caused one to do so. In the passage just quoted, the bodhisattva who is motivated by great compassion does not aim merely at reducing suffering by increasing comfortableness, but rather aims at the cultivation of virtue in self and others. Although that there are differences between Nietzsche's conception of the exemplary person and the Mahāyāna ideal of the bodhisattva, the idea that there is a kind of compassion that consists in a dispassionate recognition of the objective badness of people's failure to actualize their potential can be seen to be common to both:

> *My "compassion."* [*Mitleid*]—This is a feeling for which I find no name adequate: I sense it when I see precious capabilities squandered….Or when I see anyone halted, as a result of some stupid accident, at something less than he might have become. Or especially at the idea of the lot of mankind….Yes, what could not become of "man," if—! This is a kind of "compassion" although there is really no "passion" I share [*Dies ist eine Art „Mitleid"; ob es schon keinen Leidenden giebt, mit dem ich da litte*]." (WP 367)

Another commonality comes out in a wonderful section of *Daybreak* in which Nietzsche suggests that instead of following a version of the golden rule that requires us to take the suffering of others as seriously as we take our own, we ought rather to turn the rule on its head, and to try regarding our own suffering as disinterestedly as we are apt to regard theirs:

> *Why double your 'ego'!* To view our own experiences with the eyes with which we are accustomed to view them when they are the experiences of others—this is very comforting and a medicine to be recommended. On the other hand, to view and imbibe the experiences of others *as if they were ours*—as is the demand of a philosophy of pity—this would destroy us, and in a very short time: but just try the experiment of doing it, and fantasise no longer! Moreover, the former maxim is certainly *more in accord* with reason and the will to rationality, for we adjudge the value and meaning of an event more objectively when it happens to another than we do when it happens to us: the value, for example, of a death, or a money-loss, or a slander. Pity as a principle of action, with the demand: suffer from another's ill-fortune *as* he himself suffers, would, on the other hand, entail that the ego-stand-point, with its exaggeration and excess, would also become the stand-point of the person feeling pity: so that we would have to suffer from our own ego and at the same time from the ego of the other, and would thus voluntarily encumber ourselves with a double load of irrationality instead of making the burden of our own as light as possible. (137)

The claims that Nietzsche makes here about the irrationality of the ego standpoint, and the expediency of transcending it rather than taking it up more often, are ones which a Buddhist would happily endorse, perhaps adding that enlightened persons, on account of being free from "the ego-stand-point, with its exaggeration and excess," are not prone to initiate the kind of mischief for others caused by those in the grip of selfish desires. A bodhisattva who demonstrates "great compassion" is capable of being helpful, but a person who empathizes or identifies in an unenlightened way with the problems of others only "falls into sentimentally purposive views" and exhausts himself by involvement with suffering based on delusion, as explained in the passage from the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa sūtra* above. The sick bodhisattva reflects that just as her own sickness is unreal

from the egoless standpoint of ultimate reality—a position from which one "does not conceive of any life in living beings"—so too is the sickness of others, and as a result she exemplifies the virtue of *upekṣā,* or equanimity.

Again, although it must be acknowledged that just as there are differences between the ideal Nietzschean and the ideal Buddhist, so too are there significant differences between the degree to which Nietzsche concerns himself—or fails to concern himself—with "social 'distress,' with 'society' and its sick and unfortunate members," and the degree to which a Buddhist is supposed to. Even so, a Buddhist would recognize the anxiety Nietzsche expresses in the following apostrophe to hedonistic utilitarians:

> *Our* compassion is a higher and a more farsighted compassion [than yours]: we see how *man* makes himself smaller, how *you* make him smaller—and there are moments when we behold *your* very compassion with indescribable anxiety, when we resist this compassion—when we find your seriousness more dangerous than any frivolity….[D]o you not know that…*your* compassion is for the "creature in man," for that which must be formed, broken, forged, torn, burnt, made incandescent, and purified—that which *necessarily* must and *should* suffer? And *our* compassion—do you not comprehend for whom our converse compassion is when it resists your compassion as the worst of all pampering and weaknesses? Thus it is compassion *versus* compassion. (BGE 225)

Of course, there is a conspicuous overtone of cruelty in this passage that is distinctly unbuddhist. Furthermore, since Buddhism, and Mahāyāna Buddhism especially, is universalistic in the sense that it is believed that all beings have the potential for enlightenment, Buddhists would reject the elitism implied by the hint that Nietzsche's

"converse pity" is only for the few. Yet setting aside these admittedly important differences of emphasis, there is still a marked structural similarity between Nietzsche's analysis of "compassion *versus* compassion" here and the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa sūtra's* distinction between sentimental compassion and great compassion.

Finally, it might be wondered how exactly a person that does not necessarily *feel* compassionate can nevertheless succeed in *acting* compassionately. If enlightened beings, who are supposed to enjoy uninterrupted equanimity, do not suffer when confronted with the suffering of others, what motivates them to act so as to relieve that suffering anyway? One possibility is that enlightened beings are motivated by a sense of duty in something like the way a Kantian is supposed to be moved to right action not from inclination, but from respect for the moral law. But in Zen, this is not the answer given. One is motivated to act compassionately not by the intention to conform one's behavior to some set of principles. Rather, as Thomas Kasulis explains, one allows compassionate action to manifest spontaneously by returning to a prereflective state of consciousness in which the distinction between self and other, not to mention abstract principles, has not yet even emerged:

> Who would not, Mencius argued, feel a spontaneous urge to help a baby about to fall into a well? Of course, this does not mean that everybody would actually try to help. If the baby were the crown prince and the observer were the next in line to the throne, for example, one might repress the compassionate urge and let the baby die. The point is that only *after* distinctions are introduced is that urge

> thwarted. Thinking not only fails to grasp the true nature of prereflective compassion, but often *obstructs* the expression of compassion. (*Zen Action* 97 – 98).

Although Mencius was a Confucian who lived centuries before the emergence of Zen, his famous example is in the Zen spirit. Nietzsche considers an almost identical case in *Daybreak*, but subjects it to a different interpretation. In situations where we impulsively identity with and assist others, he claims, we are not manifesting spontaneous compassion, but in reality only thinking unconsciously of *ourselves:*

> *'No longer to think of oneself'*.— Let us reflect seriously upon this question: why do we leap after someone who has fallen into the water in front of us, even though we feel no kind of affection for him? Out of pity: at that moment we are thinking only of the other person—thus says thoughtlessness. Why do we feel pain and discomfort in common with someone spitting blood, though we may even be ill-disposed towards him? Out of pity: at that moment we are not thinking of ourself—thus says the same thoughtlessness. The truth is: in the feeling of pity—I mean in that which is usually and misleadingly called pity—we are, to be sure, not consciously thinking of ourself but are doing so *very strongly unconsciously*; as when, if our foot slips—an act of which we are not immediately conscious—we perform the most purposive counter-motions and in doing so plainly employ our whole reasoning faculty. (133)

Nietzsche then goes on to list a number of possible ulterior motives that may be at work in such cases. Not to help would make one feel powerless in the face of human vulnerability, and cowardly when reminded of dangers that pertain to oneself no less than others. But his claim that when we help others we are thinking unconsciously of ourselves is dubious. Consider the phenomenology of flinching empathetically at the sight of another's pain. On subsequent reflection, one may reconstruct the event as follows. I attempted to imagine what it would be like for me to undergo such an experience, and since the attempt was successful, my physiological response mirrors that of the person in pain. The only thing wrong with this account, it seems to me, is that the words "for me" are completely superfluous. Why not simply say that I imagine *what it would be like to experience that?* At the "unconscious" or prereflective level to which Nietzsche refers, the self-concept is not present as an intentional object. What I recognize, and flinch from, is simply the unpleasantness of the experience itself, not the unpleasantness of the prospect of "the experience as to be had by me." Of course, there is a sense in which I cannot imagine having an experience without imagining having it *myself.* In taking up the perspective of another, one necessarily takes it up in the first person as it were. But the first person perspective here is that of the transcendental as opposed to the empirical ego; it is not the locus of personality, but pure consciousness. I submit that Nietzsche simply begs the question in favor of a self-directed interpretation of the psychology of empathy above. He is right to deny that in prereflective empathy we are thinking of the other person *as another,* but wrong to infer from this that we must somehow be thinking *of ourselves*. Prereflective empathy is not unegoistic: one does not

first abandon the viewpoint of the self in order to occupy that of the other. But it is not egoistic either, since in such a state one does not conceive of a self in opposition to another. It is ontologically—or at least phenomenologically—prior to this distinction between self and other, and so it is simply egoless.

In case 89 of the Blue Cliff Records, one of the two principal kōan anthologies in Chan, Ungan asks Dōgo, "What use does the great Bodhisattva of Mercy make of all those hands and eyes?" Dōgo answers, "It is like a man straightening his pillow with his outstretched hand in the middle of the night" (Sekida, *Two Zen Classics* 375). The bodhisattva of mercy or compassion is Avalokiteśvara, or Guanyin in China, who has eleven heads and a thousand arms in order to protect all sentient beings. But Dōgo claims that the compassionate action of a bodhisattva is as effortless and thoughtless as the act of a person who is half-asleep plumping up his pillow to make himself more comfortable! The seventeenth century Rinzai Zen master Shidō Munan explains that the truly compassionate person literally thinks nothing of it:

> People who practice Buddhism will suffer pain while they are washing the defilements from their bodies; but after they have cleansed themselves and become Buddha, they no longer feel any suffering. So it is with compassion as well. While one is acting compassionately, one is aware of his compassion. When compassion has ripened, one is not aware of his compassion. When one is compassionate and unaware of it, he is Buddha. (qtd. in Foster and Shoemaker 292)

Of course, given his doubts about the efficacy of benevolent action in general, Nietzsche might be expected to take a skeptical attitude to this notion of unconscious compassion. "When people try to benefit someone in distress, the intellectual frivolity with which those moved by pity assume the role of fate is for the most part outrageous," he writes; "one simply knows nothing of the whole inner sequence and intricacies that are distress for *me* or for *you*" (GS 338). But it could be argued that his position here is a result of his rather idiosyncratic views on the nature of interpersonal relations. He writes, for example, that the "great man" "finds it tasteless to be familiar," wears a mask in public, and prefers to lie than to tell the truth (WP 962). And Zarathustra teaches that even in the company of one's friends, one should make a secret of oneself (1.14). There is something perverse about taking special pains to conceal one's inner states from others, and then complaining that the attempts of others to help usually fail because of inevitable misunderstandings. Nietzsche's worries notwithstanding, there are individuals who seem able to comport themselves with ease in just the way that difficult situations call for, and who, by so doing, can put others at their ease as well. In some cases, this might not sound like anything else but grace and good manners, but in cases involving real suffering, there may be more to it than that. The *Dhammapada* states that "the fragrance of the good ones moves against the wind; / All directions a good person pervades" (11). Perhaps there are indeed certain persons who relieve suffering just by "being themselves."

9. Concluding Remarks

Nietzsche's critique of compassion is of a piece with his broader critique of traditional moral values. He practices what Ricoeur calls a "hermeneutic of suspicion" according to which outwardly altruistic behavior ought not to be taken at face value. Psychological egoists like Hobbes, for example, argue that beneficent persons are not moved to act by a genuine interest in the welfare of others for their own sakes, but by the self-congratulatory glow that they experience as a result of performing "good deeds," and in his early work Nietzsche too sometimes maintains that what we aim at in every action is to make ourselves feel good. Thus in *Human, All Too Human,* he claims that "all that interests us organic beings in anything is its relationship to us in respect of pleasure and pain" (18). Even in this book though, he points out that one vital kind of pleasure is "the pleasure of gratification in the exercise of power" (103), and as his psychological views develop, the motivational force he attributes to purely hedonic states decreases until finally he insists that "[m]an does *not* seek pleasure and does not avoid displeasure…what man wants…is an increase of power" (WP 702). But at its worst Nietzsche's psychology of power shares the limitations of all comparable attempts to reduce the complexity of human behavior to manifestations of a single drive. Having formulated his hypothesis of the will to power, it seems that Nietzsche was too ready to find evidence for it everywhere: to put it simply, like all of us at times, he was prone to confirmation bias. Karl Popper tells the story of how he once reported a case to Alfred Adler, the details of which did not seem to him to be particularly susceptible to an

Adlerian explanation, but which Adler had no difficulty in interpreting as an example of what he famously called the inferiority complex. "Slightly shocked," writes Popper, "I asked him how he could be so sure. 'Because of my thousandfold experience,' he replied, whereupon I could not help saying 'And with this new case, I suppose, your experience has become thousand-and-one-fold" (46). Although Nietzsche is brilliant at bringing out a myriad possible ulterior motives for apparently laudatory actions, and no honest reader can avoid uncomfortable moments of self-recognition in his unflattering analyses, there is no reason to think that his deflationary account of compassion is accurate in every instance. Sometimes, as the apocryphal saying of Freud's has it, a cigar is just a cigar; and sometimes too, surely, a compassionate action is just a compassionate action.

In her essay on "Suffering in Nietzsche's Philosophy," Kathleen Higgins contends that Nietzsche's rather infamous rhetoric that "at times seems to celebrate indifference, if not outright sadism" can be read as reflecting "a strategy of overcompensation for a personal trait." Nietzsche puts such emphasis on "becoming hard" because he "seems to have regarded himself as particularly vulnerable to pity" (71). Although I think that the sadomasochistic elements in Nietzsche's makeup may have quite a complex etiology, and am sympathetic to Ofelia Schutte's suggestion that his obsession with structures of domination and oppression and his simultaneous fascination with and contempt for authority bespeak a psyche damaged by an excessively harsh Prussian upbringing (293 – 303), I am substantially in agreement with Higgins's account. Nietzsche's admission in the *Genealogy* that he reads *Don Quixote* with a "bitter taste" in his mouth, "almost with

a feeling of torment" is most revealing (2.6), as is the fact that at a time when it was very uncommon and very inconvenient to do so, he became a vegetarian from compassion for animals, at least until Wagner bullied him out of it. In *Human, All Too Human* he suggests that on awakening one's "first thought of the day" ought to be "whether one cannot this day give pleasure to at any rate *one* person" (589), and even in *The Antichrist*, after railing against pity for preserving "what is ripe for destruction" (7), he appears to forget himself in listing "care of the sick and the poor" among things that are inspired by the instinct of life and that possess intrinsic value (26). There is evidence too in his writing of his view that we tend to overvalue those traits that we have difficulty cultivating in ourselves. He writes mischievously in *Daybreak*, for example, that "inconsiderate people exhibit annoyance if anything is said against compassion (289), and in an unpublished note that "Schopenhauer idealized compassion and chastity, because he suffered most from the opposite" (NF-1880, 6[6]). Might it not be said of Nietzsche that he idealized hardness because he suffered most from compassion?

In *Human, All Too Human* Nietzsche maintains that belief in the value of life is only possible because "empathy [*Mitgefühl*] with the universal life and suffering of mankind is very feebly developed in the individual." The great majority of people see life as worth living merely because they pay so little attention to the fate of others. "*He*, on the other hand, who could really participate in [the fortunes and sufferings of other beings] would have to despair of the value of life," Nietzsche writes; "if he succeeded in encompassing and feeling within himself the total consciousness of mankind he would collapse with a curse on existence" (33). In light of this, and his wish to be an advocate

of life, one can understand his declaration at the end of book three of *The Gay Science* that his "greatest dangers" lie in compassion (271). But a few sections later, near the beginning of book four of the same work, he famously asserts that "the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is—to *live dangerously!"* (283), and near the end of book four, just a few sections before he first presents his readers with his doctrine of eternal recurrence, he confronts his greatest danger head-on, suggesting that the result of somehow empathizing with all of humanity might be very different than he had earlier imagined that it would be:

> Anyone who manages to experience the history of humanity as a whole as *his own history* will feel in an enormously generalized way all the grief of an invalid who thinks of health, of an old man who thinks of the dreams of his youth, of a lover deprived of his beloved, of the martyr whose ideal is perishing, of the hero on the evening after a battle that has decided nothing but brought him wounds and the loss of his friend. But if one endured, if one *could* endure this immense sum of grief of all kinds while yet being the hero who, as the second day of battle breaks, welcomes the dawn and his fortune…if one could burden one's soul with all of this—the oldest, the newest, losses, hopes, conquests, and the victories of humanity; if one could finally contain all this in one soul and crowd it into a single feeling—this would surely have to result in a happiness that humanity has not known so far: the happiness of a god full of power and love, full of tears and laughter, a happiness that, like the sun in the evening, continually bestows its inexhaustible riches, pouring them into the sea, feeling richest, as the sun does, only when even the poorest fisherman is still rowing with golden oars! (337)

This totalistic and ecstatic vision of the self-overcoming of the suffering of the individual in "suffering-with" others is a kind of return, after the detour represented by his middle-period writings, to a new version of the kind of Dionysian faith that Nietzsche first set forth in *The Birth of Tragedy,* and is closely connected to the eternal return and also to his *amor fati,* two of Nietzsche's most central themes that are treated in the next two chapters.

Chapter 4

The Eternal Recurrence and the Present Moment

1. Introduction

Eternal recurrence is the idea that I will live my life again and again: every event that goes to make it up will be repeated endlessly without change. Nietzsche clearly believed that the prospect of recurrence would have a momentous impact on anybody who seriously considered it, but beyond these simple facts almost everything else about the "doctrine" [*Lehre*], as Nietzsche calls it, is obscure. Although he himself regards it as central to his philosophy, various scholars who are otherwise sympathetic have tended to confine it to the margins of this thought. Like other Nietzschean themes, but perhaps to a greater degree, it raises more questions than it answers. Is it even meaningful? If so, could it be true? And what exactly is Nietzsche's purpose in advocating it?

In this chapter I will begin by setting out and commenting on the most important published texts in which the doctrine appears explicitly before attempting to trace its origins in Nietzsche's early work and to compare different published and unpublished versions of the idea. I will engage as I do so with some of the most influential scholarly

interpretations of recurrence, and in particular with those of Magnus, Nehamas, and Heidegger. I will end by proposing a reading of recurrence which conforms to a broadly Zen Buddhist framework.

I follow commentators like Magnus, Nehamas, and Higgins in approaching recurrence as "a kind of expression for a fundamental orientation toward one's life, rather than a cosmological thesis or a practical imperative" (Higgins, *Nietzsche's Zarathustra* 163). At times, Nietzsche seems to use the phrase "eternal recurrence" as a kind of shorthand for his whole worldview, which partly explains both the difficulty of explicating the conceptual content of recurrence, and the importance that he places upon it. Another reason that recurrence is so difficult to get clear on is that despite Nietzsche's suggestion in *Ecce Homo* that the idea came to him like a bolt from the blue, it has its antecedents in his earliest thought, and in the thought of his earliest predecessors. Indeed, so numerous are the possible sources of recurrence that Kaufmann claims that "only the significance of the doctrine in the framework of Nietzsche's thought is novel" (319), but since recurrence serves multiple overlapping functions for Nietzsche, this significance is not always easy to ascertain.

In my view, recurrence can be understood broadly as the culmination of Nietzsche's struggle to come to terms with his loss of faith in Christianity, and more narrowly as his response to what I will call the existential problem of impermanence that results from that loss. (By the existential problem of impermanence, I simply mean the difficulty of dealing with what Buddhists call *vipariṇāma-duḥkha*, or the suffering caused

by change.) However, it is also in part a reaction against Schopenhauer, and it is associated in Nietzsche's mind with Wagner and Buddhism too.

In the *Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche writes that "the concept 'punishment' possesses…not *one* meaning but a whole synthesis of 'meanings'" since as a practice it has been put to such various purposes that the kind of unity into which it finally crystallizes is "hard to disentangle, hard to analyze and, as must be emphasized especially, totally *indefinable*" (2.13). Much the same could be said of recurrence, which suggests that perhaps a "genealogy of recurrence" is in order: a critique of its textual origins and contextual functions as a way of throwing light on Nietzsche's attachment to the thought. Like punishment, Nietzsche's thought of recurrence is a "[concept] in which an entire process is semiotically concentrated," and as such it too "[eludes] definition," since "only that which has no history is definable," in his memorable phrase (GM 2.13). I will employ the conventional division of Nietzsche's own intellectual history into three periods as an "expedient means" of structuring my treatment.

I propose to discuss different versions of eternal recurrence under the three headings of aesthetics, science and religion. I will loosely associate each one of these headings with one of Nietzsche's intellectual periods: aesthetics with his early period, science with his middle period, and religion with his late period. By way of justifying this nomenclature, I appeal to the nature of the works that initiate each stage: *The Birth of Tragedy* is an essay on aesthetics; with *Human, All Too Human,* Nietzsche abandons Wagner and myth for science; and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is surely a religious work

of—or out of—sorts. I do not wish to hang anything of great importance on this taxonomy however, and employ these labels primarily for architectonic reasons.

Under each heading, I will examine two proposed solutions to the existential problem of impermanence, the second of which, in each case, I take to be an improvement over the first. The two aesthetic approaches I will call the mythic, which Nietzsche takes in *The Birth of Tragedy*, and the narrative, by which I refer to Nehamas's interpretation of recurrence in his *Nietzsche: Life as Literature.* The scientific approaches comprise two variations on the so-called cosmological version of recurrence, which I will call the strong cosmological theory and the weak cosmological theory. And the religious approaches, in my classification, are the Heideggerian reading of recurrence, and a finally a Zen Buddhist inspired reading of my own, in which I draw in particular on the thought of Dōgen, who is widely regarded as the greatest Japanese philosopher of all time.

So, my overall thesis, as succinctly as I can state it, is as follows: First, the different formulations of recurrence and its antecedents constitute Nietzsche's efforts to cope with the existential problem of impermanence. Second, to the extent that he succeeds in so doing, he does so by drawing on the thought of recurrence so as to live as intensely as possible in a "presentocentric" state of wonder and joy. And third, a more than superficially comparable way of life is the ideal of the Zen practitioner, for whom there is nothing more important than close attention to this very moment of awareness. I will begin to build my case, as I said above, by setting out the main published passages in which eternal recurrence features.

2. *The Gay Science*

Nietzsche introduces the idea of recurrence to his readers in the fourth and final book of the original edition of *The Gay Science* in 1882. (The fifth book was written in 1886, and added to the second edition of 1887.) The actual phrase "eternal recurrence" first occurs—though the doctrine to which it refers is only adumbrated—near the beginning of book four in a section titled *Excelsior* [Go higher!]:

> "You will never pray again, never adore again, never again rest in endless trust; you do not permit yourself to stop before any ultimate wisdom, ultimate goodness, ultimate power, while unharnessing your thoughts; you have no perpetual guardian and friend for your seven solitudes; you live without a view of mountains with snow on their peaks and fire in their hearts; there is no avenger for you any more nor any final improver; there is no longer any reason in what happens, no love in what will happen to you; no resting place is open any longer to your heart, where it only needs to find and no longer to seek; you resist any ultimate peace; you will the eternal recurrence of war and peace: man of renunciation, all this you wish to renounce? Who will give you the strength for that? Nobody yet has had this strength!"
>
> There is a lake that one day ceased to permit itself to flow off; it formed a dam where it had hitherto flown off; and ever since this lake is rising higher and higher. Perhaps this very renunciation will also lend us the strength needed to bear this renunciation; perhaps man will rise ever higher as soon as he ceases to flow out into a god. (GS 285)

Apart from its incantatory lyricism, and the pathos of its repeated negations, there are five things worth noting about this section, which embodies five of Nietzsche's most

enduring themes. First, the writing powerfully conveys a sense of utter isolation. Second, the prospect of any lasting peace is foreclosed to him. Third, as the madman famously puts it earlier in section 125 of the book, "God is dead," which of course is one of the principal reasons for Nietzsche's loneliness and his inability to find peace. (Notice how, in suggesting that there is no ultimate wisdom, goodness or power, and no perpetual guardian and friend, Nietzsche rejects both the omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent God of the philosophers, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.) Fourth, Nietzsche implies that it takes great strength to live and to think as he does; and fifth, he considers it possible that by abandoning belief in God, humankind could reach ever new heights. Thus the "eternal recurrence of war and peace" is overtly framed here in the context of a traumatic loss of faith, and made to stand as a byword for some of Nietzsche's deepest concerns.

It is in the penultimate section of book four, in a section titled *The greatest weight* [*Das grösste Schwergewicht*], that Nietzsche spells out the idea of the eternal recurrence not just of war and peace, but of every moment of one's life:

> What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you in your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more, and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"

> Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are or perhaps crush you. The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie on your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to *crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (GS 341)

The five themes of loneliness, unrestfulness, Godlessness, adversity, and human potential that appeared in section 285 appear again here. Although the content of the doctrine is now spelled out in a way that it was not before, its mode of presentation remains oblique. It is only framed as a strange thought experiment designed to test the reader's disposition; it is not an assertion—or even a hypothesis—about the real world. Interestingly, Nietzsche suggests that the prospect of recurrence could be welcomed by means of a kind of revaluation of values that echoes the so-called Romantic revolt. "Evil be thou my Good," cries Satan in *Paradise Lost;* "Demon, you are a god," cries the person who wishes to live again. Worth noting too about this section is that if one understands this thought experiment as a type of test, having *once* experienced a moment when one would have welcomed the demon's message may perhaps count as passing the test; it may not be necessary *always* to be so disposed.

The Gay Science is counted among Nietzsche's aphoristic middle period works, but he took considerably more care over the ordering of its sections than he did in the works that preceded it, and the complex of preoccupations that are related to eternal

recurrence in his mind can best be appreciated by paying close attention to the placement of the section. A few pages earlier, in section 337 he indulges in another peculiar thought experiment, which we already mentioned at the end of the previous chapter. He wonders how it would feel to experience for oneself the sum total of all the pleasure and pain of humanity since the beginning of time, and imagines that the result would be "the happiness of a god full of power and love." In section 338, he warns against the dangers of pity, while admitting that he himself is particularly susceptible to it, and recommends sharing not suffering, but joy.[52] And in section 339, titled *Vita femina*, there is an anticipatory statement of the theme of repetition:

> For seeing the ultimate beauties of a work, no knowledge or good will is sufficient; this requires the rarest of lucky accidents: The clouds that veil these peaks have to lift for once so that we see them glowing in the sun. Not only do we have to stand in precisely the right spot in order to see this, but the unveiling must have been accomplished by our own soul because it needed some external expression and parable, as if it were a matter of having something to hold on to and retain control of itself. But it is so rare for all of this to coincide that I am inclined to believe that the highest peaks of everything good, whether it be a work, a deed, humanity, or nature, have so far remained concealed and veiled from the great majority and even from the best human beings. But what does unveil itself for us, *unveils itself for us once only*.

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[52] "I want to teach…what is understood by so few today, least of all by…preachers of pity [*Mitleid*]: *Mitfreude*." The German word *Mitleid*, like the English words compassion and sympathy, literally means "suffering with." Notoriously, there is a word in German—*Schadenfreude*—for the taking of pleasure in another's misfortune, but there is no word in either English or German for rejoicing with; or at least there wasn't until Nietzsche coined *Mitfreude*. (He first uses the term in *Richard Wagner in Bayreuth* section 11, and again in *Human, All Too Human* 499 and 614, and in *Assorted Opinions and Maxims* 62.) Sanskrit suffers from no such lexical gap: *muditā*, or sympathetic joy, along with loving-kindness, and equanimity, is one of the four divine virtues that Buddhists cultivate in certain meditative exercises.

> The Greeks, to be sure, prayed: "Everything beautiful twice and even three times!" They implored the gods with good reason, for ungodly reality gives us the beautiful either not at all or once only. I mean to say that the world is overfull of beautiful things but nevertheless poor, very poor when it comes to beautiful moments and unveilings of these things. But perhaps this is the most powerful magic of life: it is covered by a veil interwoven with gold, a veil of beautiful possibilities, sparkling with promise, resistance, bashfulness, mockery, pity, and seduction. Yes, life is a woman (GS 339).

The familiar talk here about a world poor in beauty that is covered by a beautiful veil, and the personification of life as a seductive woman, might mislead a casual reader into assimilating this passage to Nietzsche's fairly frequently stated view that "the terror and horror of existence" (BT 3) is only bearable because art "[lays] over it the veil of unclear thinking" (HAH 151). Indeed, a little earlier in *The Gay Science* he asks how we can "make things beautiful, attractive, and desirable for us when they are not," conceding that he rather thinks that "in themselves they never are" (299). But what he actually says in section 339 is that "the world is overfull of beautiful things but nevertheless poor, very poor when it comes to beautiful moments and unveilings of these things." In other words, he implies that there is an unbeautiful veil of appearance that covers a beautiful underlying reality; *not*, as is usual in his middle period writings, the converse! And fascinatingly, it seems that Nietzsche cannot decide whether the reason for the dearth of beautiful unveilings, or revelations [*Enthüllungen*], is to be found in the nature of the world itself, or rather in that of the individual.

On the one hand, neither knowledge nor good will is sufficient for seeing; but on the other, the unveiling is the work of our own soul, even though what is unveiled unveils

itself! Here, as Joan Stambaugh remarks elsewhere of Zarathustra, it seems as if Nietzsche's "soul has in a way become all things, but in a way that goes beyond Aristotle's similar sounding statement" (*The Other Nietzsche* 139). The individual who lives through such a beautiful moment experiences him or herself as neither active nor passive, but simply *involved.* But of course this is true of all epiphanies, all heightened states and mystical experiences. The phenomenological boundary between the subject and the object becomes blurred—the object is only an "external expression and parable" of the subject—in an instance of what Jung, borrowing the phrase from the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, called *participation mystique.* One can work to put oneself in a state of receptivity that is apt to vouchsafe insight into a phenomenon, but intellect and effort may not be adequate; the insight when it comes has the character of a gift. Christians speak of the grace of God; for Nietzsche, there is "the heaven Accident…the heaven Chance" (Z 3.4).

"Everything beautiful twice and even three times" is a reference to Plato, *Gorgias* 498e and *Philebus* 59e – 60a. Nietzsche's reimagining, or misremembering, of the text as a prayer is revealing: according to Socrates, it is a proverb, not a prayer. But since Nietzsche uses it to foreshadow the eternal recurrence he gives it a religious glow. (He can never pray for salvation to the Christian God again, but like the Greeks, he *can* pray for—or at least hope for—the recurrence of beautiful moments.) In Goethe's *Faust,* the hero makes a deal with Mephistopheles such that as soon as he craves peace, or stretches himself on an idler's bed, as soon as he bids the passing moment "Ah, stay a while—you are so fair!" he dies. In his thirst for knowledge, his ceaseless striving, and his

willingness to sacrifice his peace of mind for greatness, Nietzsche is an archetypical Faust figure, and he repeatedly associates rest with decadence and death. In a letter to Wagner in 1870 he expresses what he strangely calls "the strangest of all wishes": "let the moment stay—it is so beautiful" (SL 66). Fifteen years later Zarathustra insists that "if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, 'You please me happiness! Abide, moment!' then you wanted *all* back" (4.19.10). But Nietzsche's conscience will not quite allow him to bid even the most beautiful moment to stay, since to do so would be to abandon his commitment to process philosophy and capitulate to Platonic metaphysics. On the other hand, he has great difficulty accepting that the most beautiful moments pass away forever. In one sense, the eternal recurrence is Nietzsche's peculiar attempt to escape between the horns of this dilemma. Rather than falling into the trap that Faust did by crying "Stay!" to the moment, he says "[G]o, but return!" (Z 4.19.10).

Moving on to the following section, in 340 there is an important meditation on the dying Socrates, in which Nietzsche claims that the last words of the outwardly cheerful philosopher ("I owe Asclepius a rooster") betray him as a pessimist who suffered from life as a disease. In "The Problem of Socrates" from *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche makes the case against Socrates at greater length, but the implication is clear enough: Socrates had the courage to die, but he would not have had the courage to bear the "greatest weight" by affirming the prospect of recurrence presented by the demon in the next section. That distinction is reserved for Zarathustra, who is introduced immediately afterwards in the final section of book four, which is titled *Incipit tragoedia*, or "the tragedy begins." This section is repeated practically verbatim, presumably to symbolize

recurrence, as the first part of "Zarathustra's Prologue," the opening of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

3. Thus Spoke Zarathustra

The plot of *Zarathustra* is largely driven by its protagonist's efforts to articulate and to accept his "most abysmal thought" (3.13.3), which comes to him obscurely in dreams and visions. The thought of recurrence is hinted at here and there towards the end of Part II until in the final section his "stillest hour" speaks to him, and insists that he knows it. "Yes, I know it, but I do not want to say it!" Zarathustra responds. He gives his first account of recurrence shortly thereafter in "On the Vision and the Riddle" to a dwarf he calls the spirit of gravity [*Geist der Schwere*]:

> Behold…this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads *backward*: behind us lies an eternity. Must not whatever *can* walk have walked on this lane before? Must not whatever *can* happen have happened, have been done, have passed by before? And if everything has been there before—what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before? And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it *all* that is to come? Therefore—itself too? For whatever *can* walk—in this long lane out *there* too, it *must* walk once more.
>
> And this slow spider, which crawls in the moonlight, and this moonlight itself, and I and you in the gateway, whispering together, whispering of eternal things—must not all of us have been here before? And return and walk in that

> other lane, out there, before us, in this long dreadful lane—must we not eternally return? (Z 3.2.2)

But his account takes the form of a series of questions; he is still unwilling to assert it; and in the end his animals, the snake and the eagle, must elaborate it on his behalf:

> "O Zarathustra," the animals said, "to those who think as we do, all things themselves are dancing: they come and offer their hands and laugh and flee—and come back. Everything goes, everything comes back; eternally rolls the wheel of being. Everything dies, everything blossoms again; eternally runs the year of being. Everything breaks, everything is joined anew; eternally the same house of being is built. Everything parts, everything greets every other thing again; eternally the ring of being remains faithful to itself. In every Now, being begins; round every Here rolls the sphere There. The center is everywhere. Bent is the path of eternity." (3.13.2)

Zarathustra, on hearing his animals, smiles, and calls them "buffoons and barrel organs." "[H]ave you already made a hurdy-gurdy song of this?" he asks. Gilles Deleuze takes this humorous scolding to mean that the animals' version of recurrence is a travesty, noting that when the spirit of gravity in "On the Vision and the Riddle" mutters contemptuously that "time itself is a circle," Zarathustra chides him angrily "not [to] make things too easy for [himself]." According to Deleuze, eternal recurrence implies that there is a kind of principle of selection in the nature of things that eliminates what is weak and reactive over the long term, and only allows what is strong and active to return.

Reactive forces auto-destruct: "The small, petty, reactive man will not recur" (102). But this is a highly idiosyncratic reading, with little textual warrant. Zarathustra's "great disgust with man" and the prospect of "the eternal recurrence even of the smallest" (3.13.2) is indeed a source of terrible distress to him, but he accepts this prospect to become "the man who overcame the great nausea" (4.8); he does not simply deny it as Deleuze claims Nietzsche does. The *thought* of recurrence may effectively separate strong from weak persons, since only strong persons would want to live their lives over again; but there is no indication that Nietzsche considered that the *reality* of recurrence only applied to the active and the strong. If Zarathustra allowed himself to think, with Deleuze, that reactive persons do not recur, he would not have overcome his nausea, rather he would only, like the spirit of gravity, have made things too easy for *himself.*

In short, the fact that Zarathustra mocks his animals does not imply that their account of recurrence is a complete distortion. He mocks them because just before they addressed him, he had ironically criticized *all* speaking as inadequate. "How lovely it is that there are words and sounds!" he tells them. "Have not names and sounds been given to things that man might find things refreshing? Speaking is a beautiful folly: with that man dances over all things. How lovely is all talking, and all the deception of sounds!" (3.13.2). Even as he teases his animals, Zarathustra acknowledges repeatedly how well they know him, as he reveals his disgust with the accusers of life, until his animals bid him not to speak, but to sing, and finally name him "the teacher of the eternal recurrence":

> "Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves too; and that we have already existed an eternal number of times, and all things with us. You teach that there is a great year of becoming, a monster of a great year, which must, like an hourglass, turn over again and again so that it may run down and run out again; and all these years are alike in what is greatest as in what is smallest; and we ourselves are alike in every great year, in what is greatest as in what is smallest.
>
> "And if you wanted to die now, O Zarathustra, behold, we also know how you would then speak to yourself. But your animals beg you not to die yet. You would speak, without trembling but breathing deeply with happiness, for a great weight and sultriness would be taken from you who are most patient.
>
> "'Now I die and vanish,' you would say, 'and all at once I am nothing. The soul is as mortal as the body. But the knot of causes in which I am entangled recurs and will create me again. I myself belong to the causes of the eternal recurrence. I come again, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent—*not* to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest, to teach again the eternal recurrence of all things, to speak again the word of the great noon of earth and man, to proclaim the overman again to men. I spoke my word, I break of my word: thus my eternal lot wants it; as a proclaimer I perish. The hour has now come when he who goes under should bless himself. Thus *ends* Zarathustra's going under." (3.13.2)

This is the longest and most straightforward account of recurrence to be found in Nietzsche's published work, but even so it leaves many questions unanswered. In *The Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche seems to identify with Zarathustra in calling *himself* "the teacher of eternal recurrence" (10.5), but it is unclear whether Nietzsche, or even Zarathustra, endorses the account of recurrence proffered by the animals here. After the animals have finished speaking, they fall silent and wait for Zarathustra to respond to

them, but he doesn't even hear their silence, since he is lying with his eyes closed, as though asleep, conversing with his soul in a long interior monologue that forms the subject of the following section of the book. The animals steal cautiously away out of respect, without having received Zarathustra's verdict on their version of recurrence, and indeed it is uncertain whether he has even heard his animals speaking any more than he has heard their silence, since it may well be that the monologue in the following section is unfolding simultaneously with their speech.

In the section immediately after that, "The Other Dancing Song," life personified as a beautiful woman tells Zarathustra softly that she knows that he is thinking of leaving her. "[W]hen you hear [the] bell strike the hour at midnight, then you think between one and twelve—you think, O Zarathustra, I know it, of how you want to leave me soon," she says. Yes, he answers, "but you also know—" and he "[whispers] something into her ear" (3.15.2): presumably, according to Kaufmann, "that after his death he will yet [return] eternally" (PN 263). "You *know* that, O Zarathustra? Nobody knows that," she responds. "And we looked at each other and gazed on the green meadow over which the cool evening was running just then, and we wept together. But then life was dearer to me than all my wisdom ever was," Zarathustra recounts (3.15.2).

This passage, I think, calls the status of any literal account of recurrence quite seriously into question. Zarathustra may *conjecture* that he will live an identical life again endless times, but life humbles him by telling him that he cannot *know* it; and in admitting that at that time life was dearer than his wisdom to him, Zarathustra seems to acquiesce. As the bell tolls the hour at midnight, Zarathustra sings a round line by line at

each of the first eleven strokes, but on the stroke of twelve, at the moment associated with recurrence, he says nothing. "The absence of any phrase corresponding to the twelfth stroke of the bell may suggest a truth that is beyond all language," Sonoda Muneto claims in "The Eloquent Silence of Zarathustra" (239).

The following section, "The Seven Seals," is the final section of Part III, which is the last part of *Zarathustra* that Nietzsche chose to publish proper—Part IV was only circulated privately to a few close friends—and the closest he comes to stating *his* version of recurrence here is in the refrain of "The Yes and Amen Song": "For I love you, O eternity!" In "The Drunken Song" just before the end of part IV, he reprises his round—which we learn is named "Once More"—from part III, and provides it with a running commentary for the benefit of the group of higher men that he has invited to his cave for a feast. This commentary, and especially the part that precedes the climactic line of the round—"But all joy wants eternity"—I take to be Zarathustra's best effort to explicate the content of recurrence, and perhaps even Nietzsche's as well:

> You higher men, what do you think? Am I a soothsayer? A dreamer? A drunkard? An interpreter of dreams? A midnight bell? A drop of dew? A haze and fragrance of eternity? Do you not hear it? Do you not smell it? Just now my world became perfect: midnight too is noon; pain too is a joy; curses too are a blessing; night too is a sun—go away or you will learn: a sage too is a fool. Have you ever said Yes to a single joy? O my friends, then you said Yes too to *all* woe. All things are entangled, ensnared, enamored; if ever you wanted one thing twice, if ever you said, "You please me, happiness! Abide, moment!" then you wanted *all* back. All anew, all eternally, all entangled, ensnared, enamored—oh, then you *loved* the world. Eternal ones, love it eternally and

> evermore; and to woe too, you say: go, but return! *For all joy wants—eternity.* (4.19.10)

Eternal recurrence is here associated with a mystical state of consciousness in which the world takes on the aspect of perfection. Opposites—ordinarily interdependent in Nietzsche's thought—now become phenomenologically indistinguishable in a state of ecstatic wonder and joy at the process of endless becoming. Many themes are touched upon in *Zarathustra*, including the *Übermensch* and the will to power, but in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche calls recurrence its "fundamental conception," and describes it as the "highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable" (EH Z 1). Elsewhere in *Ecce Homo*, in the sections on *The Birth of Tragedy*, he explains recurrence as "the unconditioned and infinitely repeated circular course of all things" (EH BT 3). But it is *all things* collectively that are repeated, not *each thing* individually; it seems that Nietzsche, unlike Zarathustra's animals, is not prepared fully to endorse the idea that identical events recur, but only that the process of becoming is endlessly cyclical. Thus construed, eternal recurrence is in effect a corollary of *amor fati*, and this does seem to be how Nietzsche has come to think of it by 1888.

There are however several widely held, and well-supported, understandings of recurrence in more narrowly normative terms. They take their cue from Nietzsche's memorable claim that "the question…'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon [one's] actions as the greatest weight" (GS 341). Georg Simmel for example sees it as a conscious variation on Kant's categorical imperative,

writing that "Kant places action into the dimension of infinite repetition in the one-alongside-the-other of society, whereas Nietzsche has action repeat itself in the infinite one-after-the-other of the same person" (171). Thus while for Kant one ought only to perform an action that one would be willing for anybody in relevantly similar circumstances to perform, for Nietzsche one should only do what one would be willing to do countless times again oneself.

"Even if the repetition of the cycle is only a probability or a possibility," Nietzsche maintains in one note, "the thought of a possibility can also convulse and transform us, not just emotions and definite expectations. How the possibility of eternal damnation has worked!" (NF-1881, 11[203]). In a scene from his novel *When Nietzsche Wept* based on this note Irvin D. Yalom has Nietzsche ask, *à la* Pascal, "What do you have to lose by considering [recurrence] a possibility? Can you not think of it then as 'Nietzsche's wager'?" (251). Hans Vaihinger, stresses the role of "conscious illusion" in Nietzsche's thought, and some have held that the idea is to behave *as if* the doctrine were true (83 – 87). Yet although these and other normative interpretations of recurrence may be more cogent than certain literal interpretations, they are not unproblematic. For either some literal version of recurrence is true or it is not. If it is not, then the injunction to live as if it were seems incongruous; and if it is, then *any* injunction to live in such and such a way seems futile.

One horn of the dilemma involves admitting that recurrence is not literally true, but a person who accepts this—yet behaves as if it were—is subject to some of the same criticisms that can be made of a person who accepts Pascal's wager; doing so appears to

demand that one violate the norms of practical rationality. One may occasionally act as if something that one supposes to be false is true, in order to keep up appearances, for example; but reasonable persons surely do not shape their lives according to a conception that they do not believe to be true. Nietzsche's high regard for truthfulness and disdain for those who live without questioning would seem to preclude this reading. He writes in *The Gay Science* that "*the great majority of people* does not consider it contemptible to believe this or that and to live accordingly, without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con, and without even troubling themselves about such reasons afterward" (2). He *does* find this contemptible though. How much more then would he look down on the stratagem of consciously blinding oneself to the implausibility of a doctrine that governs one's whole way of life? It is highly unlikely—his encomiums on the value of art as appearance notwithstanding—that he would advocate such a procedure.

The other horn is that recurrence is literally true: this raises the spectre of determinism in a rather drastic fashion. It may be that from a strictly logical point of view, eternal recurrence presents no greater a threat to freedom than does ordinary determinism, and many scholars read Nietzsche as a kind of compatibilist. But psychologically, the thought that one's life—and with it all one's future actions down to the finest detail—has occurred countless times already does seem to add a paralyzing kind of weight—the weight of the past—to the view that the future is fixed and unchangeable. Nietzsche himself was acutely aware of this, and makes a half-hearted

attempt to resolve the issue in the notebook from 1881 in which the recurrence is first sketched:

> "But if everything is necessary, how can I determine my actions?" This thought and belief are a heavy weight pressing down on you alongside every other weight, and more than them. You say that food, location, air, company transform and condition you? Well, your opinions do so even more, since it is they that determine your choice of food, location, air, company. If you incorporate the thought of thoughts within yourself, it will transform you. The question in everything that you want to do: "is it the case that I want to do it countless times?" is the *greatest* weight. (NR 239)

Nietzsche's attempt here to argue that since mental factors determine physical ones, one is thereby free to determine one's actions will not work; it could simply be objected that the mental factors in question are themselves determined by antecedent factors in turn, and a version of the so-called consequence argument against compatibilism could be constructed on that basis.[53]

Bernd Magnus rejects narrowly normative versions of recurrence, and reads it instead as an "existential imperative." This interpretation is, he holds, "utterly indifferent" to its truth value (*Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* 142). Recurrence is an "ontological allegory" which illustrates the attitude and the being-in-the-world of the *Übermensch* (159). *Übermenschen wish* to live their lives again, regardless of whether or

[53] For example: "If eternal recurrence is true, then every action that I now take is necessarily identical to an action that has been taken in the past. But there is nothing I can now do to change an action that has been taken in the past. Therefore there is nothing I can now do to change any action that I take."

not they *will*. No specific morality is implied, but only an affirmative orientation. Nietzsche's existential imperative, as opposed to the ethical universalism of the Kantian categorical imperative, is "deliberately pluralistic":

> My doctrine says: the task is to live your life in *such* a way that you have to *want* to live again—you will *in any case!* If striving gives you the highest feeling, then strive; if rest gives you the highest feeling, then rest; if fitting in, following, obedience give you the highest feeling, then obey. Only *make sure you become aware of what* gives you the highest feeling and then stop at *nothing!* Eternity is at stake! (NR 241)

Magnus's attractive reading avoids the pitfalls of the interpretations just canvassed, and has much to recommend it textually and philosophically. His view is faithful to Nietzsche's original presentation of the idea, in which one's response to it functions as a kind of diagnostic test. And his construal of this test as a method of picking out *Übermenschen,* or perhaps more accurately, his construal of a passionately positive attitude towards the prospect of recurrence *as itself constitutive* of what it would mean to be an *Übermensch* is one way of fleshing out another Nietzschean idea that sometimes seems like little more than a cipher.[54] Yet it is in the nature of the case that no single reading can aspire definitively to straighten out the tangle of ideas that comprise eternal recurrence, and the fact that Magnus's version is "utterly indifferent" to its literal truth is hard to reconcile with Nietzsche's interest in this very truth. Even in the passage

[54] To put it very briefly, Magnus argues that to the extent that one desired nothing more than to relive one's life over and over *without any change*, one would be more godlike than human, and thus *Übermenschlich.*

above, which Magnus quotes to support his view, Nietzsche, in urging us to live so that we would wish to live again, adds—albeit almost as an afterthought—that we will live again anyway.

At this point I have set out the most important texts from *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* pertaining to eternal recurrence, and have offered something by way of clarification of these texts. I will now turn back to locate the antecedents of the idea in Nietzsche's early work, and will trace its development in an effort to throw more light on its later formulations.

4. The Origins of Eternal Recurrence

Although eternal recurrence is referred to rarely enough in Nietzsche's published works after *Zarathustra*, it is unlike other ideas first expounded there, such as the *Übermensch* and arguably the will to power, in that his commitment to it only grows stronger with time, especially in the last year of his productive life. *"[Y]ou are the teacher of the eternal recurrence,"* the prophet's animals tell him at the climax of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (3.13); but we saw above that four years later in the closing lines of *Twilight of the Idols*—a summary of his mature thought—Nietzsche claims this honor for himself. In *Ecce Homo* he supplies an almost Mosaic *mise en scène* for the origin of his prized idea:

> The fundamental conception of [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*], the idea of the eternal recurrence, this highest formula of affirmation that is at all attainable, belongs in August 1881: it was penned on a sheet with the notation underneath, "6000 feet beyond man and time." That day I was walking through the woods along the lake of Silvaplana; at a powerful pyramidal rock not far from Surlei I stopped. It was then that this idea came to me. (EH Z 1)

The above excerpt is followed by one of several rather strange passages in *Ecce Homo* that some have interpreted as portending Nietzsche's immanent breakdown. Maintaining that "a rebirth of the art of *hearing*" was a precondition of his having written *Zarathustra*, he hints at a mythological divine impregnation when he writes that he was visited by "the phoenix of music" in the spring of 1881. But there is no need to take this literally: Nietzsche often resorts to passive and parturitive metaphors and imagery when discussing the way his ideas occur to him—"a thought comes when 'it' wishes, and not when 'I' wish" (BGE 17)—and never more so than in the case [*der Fall*] of eternal recurrence, for which the legendary firebird that dies in flames and is reborn from its own ashes would make an excellent heavenly messenger.

It was while walking around the bay of Rapallo that "the whole of *Zarathustra I* occurred to me," he writes, "and especially Zarathustra himself as a type: rather he overtook me" [*fiel mir der ganze erste Zarathustra ein, vor Allem Zarathustra selber, als Typus: richtiger,* er überfiel mich…] (EH Z 1). *Einfallen* means to come to mind, to occur to, or even to invade; *überfallen* to attack, raid, descend upon, or overcome, as in the English phrasal verb "to fall on. This "cadential" motif—"Perhaps the whole of *Zarathustra* can be reckoned as music" (EH Z 1)—is ubiquitous in Nietzsche. In the

preface to *Ecce Homo*, he quotes the following lines from *Zarathustra:* "The figs are *falling* from the trees…Thus, like figs, these teachings *fall* to you," and then continues: "from an infinite abundance of light and depth of happiness *falls* drop upon drop and word upon word" (4). Immediately afterwards in the epigraph he surveys this windfall of the fruits of happiness: "the eye of the sun just *fell* upon my life: I looked back, I looked forward, and never saw so many and such good things at once" [my italics throughout]. The imagery of passivity—or better, receptivity—that is closely linked with *amor fati* and eternal recurrence is significant because it contrasts so sharply with the tone of self-assertion that Nietzsche adopts when he writes about the will to power.

It is not just any music that *Zarathustra* might be reckoned as; it is anti-Wagnerian music. (Recall Hollinrake's view that Part IV is a parody of *Parsifal*.) Nietzsche claims that the *"finale"* [*Schlusspartie*] of Part I "was finished exactly in that sacred hour in which Richard Wagner died in Venice." Reckoning forward from the day that the idea of eternal recurrence struck him to the "sudden birth"[55] of *Zarathustra* Part I in February 1883, Nietzsche gets precisely eighteen months for the pregnancy, a figure that he bizarrely claims "might suggest, at least to Buddhists, that [he is] really a female elephant" (EH Z 1). Nietzsche seems to have in mind the hagiographical story that Maya, the mother of the Buddha, had a prophetic dream involving a sacred white elephant before she conceived him. The elephant's gestation period is actually closer to twenty-two months, and in the Buddha's case, the elephant was male; the Buddha was

[55] The German word he uses here for the *advent* of the figure who will announce the idea of eternal recurrence, or *der Ewige-Wiederkunfts-Gedanke* is *Niederkunft,* or literally "downcome."

born of a human mother. But it seems that, for Nietzsche, as Wagner dies, Zarathustra is reborn in circumstances like those that attended the Buddha's birth. I do not mean to make too much of these associations; all I mean to do is indicate that eternal recurrence was closely connected with Buddhism in Nietzsche's mind. In a note from 1887 he even calls one version of it the "European form of Buddhism" (WP 55).

To reiterate a point made at the beginning of the chapter: despite the impression that Nietzsche conveys in *Ecce Homo* of the idea of recurrence striking him like a bolt from the blue, it actually had a gestation period much longer than any elephant's. Psychologically speaking, the thought—like so many of Nietzsche's—can be seen in part as a response to Schopenhauer. Richard Schacht, among others, points out that in championing recurrence, Nietzsche is picking up a gauntlet thrown down by Schopenhauer (*Nietzsche* 260). The challenge in question is put in the following passage of *The World as Will and Representation:*

> A man who...found satisfaction in life and took perfect delight in it; who desired, in spite of calm deliberation, that the course of his life as he had hitherto experienced it should be of endless duration or of constant recurrence; and whose courage to face life was so great that, in return for life's pleasures, he would willingly and gladly put up with all the hardships and miseries to which it is subject...would stand "with firm, strong bones on the well-grounded, enduring earth," and would have nothing to fear. Armed with the knowledge we confer on him, he would look with indifference at death hastening towards him on the wings of time. (1: 283)

Needless to say, Schopenhauer finds the prospect of such a man highly improbable, adding some forty pages later that "perhaps at the end of his life, no man, if he be sincere and at the same time in possession of his faculties, will ever wish to go through it again. Rather than this, he will much prefer to choose complete non-existence." (*World* 1: 324). Nietzsche, of course, was not in possession of his faculties at the end of his life, and so was in no position to make such a choice at that time; but whether he ever sincerely wished to go through it all again, he plainly *wanted* to want to. Richard Schacht rightly draws our attention to the extreme nature of Nietzsche's acceptance of the challenge posed by Schopenhauer:

> Nietzsche…may initially have intended his affirmation of the idea of eternal recurrence as a response to Schopenhauer, in just the terms Schopenhauer proposes in his test; only he extends them to include not merely the events of his own life but all events that have occurred, and to encompass a recurrence of them not merely once but infinitely many times ("eternally"), to indicate that his response to Schopenhauer's test differs from Schopenhauer's own as radically as possible (*Making Sense of Nietzsche* 61n14)

However, there are some interesting intertextual issues relating to Schopenhauer's treatment of the theme that Schacht does not pursue. The phrase Schopenhauer quotes in the above passage—"with firm, strong bones on the well-grounded, enduring earth"—is from Goethe's poem *"Grenzen der Menschheit,"* or "The Limits of Humankind." In a gushing pen portrait in *Twilight of the Idols* Nietzsche depicts Goethe as standing "amid the cosmos with a joyous and trusting fatalism" (9.49); that is to say, as exemplifying the

amor fati so tightly bound up with eternal recurrence. Assuming that Schacht is right, and that the eternal recurrence is—at least in part—a reaction to the passage by Schopenhauer, it is surely significant that the person who could pass the test is described in Goethean verses that Nietzsche would have known well; verses that Zarathustra later echoes when he urges his disciples to "[r]emain faithful to the earth" (1.22.2).

Ironically enough though, the poem—as its title suggests—is an expression of piety and a warning against hubris: *"Denn mit Göttern/ Soll sich nicht messen/ Irgendein Mensch"* [For nobody should compete with the gods]; a warning that Nietzsche—or at any rate Zarathustra ("*if* there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god!" (Z 2.2))—was not much disposed to heed. Closer to Nietzsche's way of thinking is the final stanza from "Prometheus" that Schopenhauer quotes just a few lines below the "constant recurrence" passage; another poem by a more romantic Goethe written seven years earlier than *"Grenzen der Menschheit"* circa 1774, the year that *The Sorrows of Young Werther* was published. Nietzsche himself had quoted the same stanza in *The Birth of Tragedy:*

Hier sitz ich, forme Menschen
Nach meinem Bilde,
Ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich sei,
Zu leiden, zu weinen,
Zu genießen und zu freuen sich,
Und dein nich zu achten,
Wie ich!

Here I sit, forming men
in my own image,

a race to be like me,
to suffer, to weep,
to delight and to rejoice,
and to defy you,
as I do. (BT 9)

But if the "constant recurrence" passage in Schopenhauer is one source of the eternal recurrence, one source of the "constant recurrence" passage in turn is to be found in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion.* Picking up a thread from Philo, who suggests that it is fear of death, not love of life, that prevents people from committing suicide—that "[w]e are terrified, not bribed to the continuance of our existence"—Demea recalls how Cicero wrote of "the great, the fortunate Cato, protesting in his old age, that had he a new life in his offer, he would reject the present," and then concludes:

> Ask yourself, ask any of your acquaintance, whether they would live over again the last ten or twenty years of their lives. No! but the next twenty, they say, will be better:
>
> > And from the dregs of life, hope to receive
> > What the first sprightly running could not give.
>
> Thus at last they find (such is the greatness of human misery, it reconciles even contradictions), that they complain at once of the shortness of life, and of its vanity and sorrow. (Hume 73; pt. 10)[56]

[56] Could this passage from Hume be the source of the "old joke" that Alvy Singer tells in *Annie Hall's* opening monologue? "Uh, two elderly women are at a Catskills mountain resort, and one of 'em says: 'Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.' The other one says, 'Yeah, I know, and such…small

Nietzsche copied out the first half of this passage, along with several others from Hume's *Dialogues* in a notebook from 1873 (UW 231; NF-1873, 29[86]). He was most likely moved to read the book as a result of a recommendation by Schopenhauer that he would have found hard to resist: "To know Hume, we must read his *Natural History of Religion* and the *Dialogues on Natural Religion.* There we see him in his greatness, and these…are the works on account of which—I can think of nothing better to say for his fame—he is hated above all by the English clergy even at the present day" (*World* 2:338). Hume's words find their way (almost unaltered and unattributed to their author) into the opening section of *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life*, while the verses by Dryden that Hume has Demea quote, Nietzsche mistakenly ascribes to Hume himself:

> Why and to what purpose do people live? Anyone who asks his acquaintances whether they would like to relive the last ten or twenty years will easily recognize which of them are suited for [the] suprahistorical standpoint. To be sure, they will all answer "No!," but they will give different reasons for this answer. Some, perhaps, by consoling themselves with the claim "but the next twenty will be better." Of such people David Hume once said derisively:
>
> > And from the dregs of life hope to receive,
> > What the first sprightly running could not give.

---

portions.' Well, that's essentially how I feel about life. Full of loneliness and misery and suffering and unhappiness, and it's all over much too quickly." (Allen 4)

Nietzsche calls these misguided optimists "historical human beings." They live in hope that "justice will come" and that "happiness is waiting" around the corner: "These historical human beings believe that the meaning of existence will come ever more to light in the course of a *process;* they look backward only to understand the present…and to learn to desire the future even more keenly"[57] (HL 1). He contrasts these historical persons with "suprahistorical human beings" [*überhistorischen Menschen*], who would not like to relive their pasts either: but not because they look forward to a brighter future, but because they live fully in the *present:*

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[57] The verses by Dryden that Hume quotes above are spoken by the title character in his 1675 drama *Aureng-Zebe* about the (then-ruling) last great Mughal emperor of India. Nietzsche obviously could not have known this—since he misattributes the verses to Hume—but this means, amusingly enough, that there is at least a weak sense in which one idea that prompted eternal recurrence can here be traced back to India, via Schopenhauer, Hume and Dryden; although the historical Aurangzeb was of course a Muslim, not a Hindu or a Buddhist; and in any event Dryden's Aureng-Zebe is merely a literary character. Interestingly, the attitude that Nietzsche's "historical human beings" take to life parallels that reflected in the empress Nourmahal's response to Aureng-Zebe's Schopenhauerian lament:

> *Aur.* When I consider Life, 'tis all a cheat;
> Yet, fool'd with hope, men favour the deceit;
> Trust on, and think to morrow will repay:
> To morrow's falser than the former day;
> Lies worse, and while it says, We shall be blest
> With some new joys, cuts off what we possest.
> Strange couzenage! None would live past years again,
> Yet all hope pleasure in what yet remain;
> And, from the dregs of Life, think to receive
> What the first sprightly running could not give.
> I'm tir'd with waiting for this Chymic Gold,
> Which fools us young, and beggars us when old.
> *Nour.* 'Tis not for nothing that we life pursue;
> It pays our hopes with something still that's new:
> Each day's a Mistris, unenjoy'd before;
> Like Travellers, we're pleas'd with seeing more.
> Did you but know what joys your way attend,
> You would not hurry to your journeys end.
> (Dryden 210)

> [The suprahistorical human being] does not seek salvation in a process, but rather in every human being and every experience, and…moreover, believes he recognizes in every experienced period of time, in every day, in every hour why we live at all: so that for him the world is complete [*fertig*] and has arrived at its culmination in every individual moment. What can ten new years possibly teach that the past ten, if they were to be experienced once more, could not! (UW 288; NF-1873, 30[2])[58]

We have already seen, in analyzing section 339 of *The Gay Science*, how for Nietzsche the experience of beautiful moments is tied to eternal recurrence; here we see that the suprahistorical human beings' *experience* of the world as being complete at every moment foreshadows recurrence and Zarathustra's repeated cry at noon in the section so named (4.10) and again at midnight in "The Drunken Song" (4.19) that the world is perfect.

But the word *fertig*, which is translated "complete" above, can also be translated "finished"; and like the word English word finished (and unlike *volkommen*, or perfect), the word *fertig* is ambiguous: it can be used for example to praise a work of art to which the finishing touches have been made, or a person to whom the finishing blow has been dealt! This ambiguity does not seem accidental: Nietzsche shares the suprahistorical beings' misgivings about the nineteenth century ideal of progress, but he is not fully comfortable with their worldview, and he projects his ambivalence about its implications onto them:

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[58] I have quoted a draft version of this passage; the shorter published version is as follows: "[The] suprahistorical human being…does not seek salvation in a process, but for [him or her] instead the world is complete and has arrived at its culmination in every individual moment. What could ten new years possibly teach that the past ten could not!" (HL 1).

> Suprahistorical beings have never agreed whether the substance of [their] doctrine is happiness or resignation, virtue or atonement [*busse*]; but, contrary to all historical modes of viewing the past, they do arrive at unanimity with regard to the statement: the past and the present are one and the same. That is, in all their diversity, they are identical in type, and as the omnipresence of imperishable types they make up a stationary formation of unalterable worth and eternally identical meaning. (HL 1)

It seems that Nietzsche cannot make up his mind about the significance of the suprahistorical standpoint because he thinks that whatever happiness is associated with it is too close to resignation for comfort—"anyone who occupies [the suprahistorical standpoint] could no longer be seduced [to continue] living on and taking part in history"—and that this resignation, in turn, is too close to disgust, and life-denying pessimism:

> [G]iven the infinite superabundance of events, how could [suprahistorical human beings] possibly avoid being satiated, oversatiated, indeed, even nauseated! Ultimately, perhaps the rashest the rashest of these suprahistorical human beings will be prepared to say to his heart, as did Giacomo Leopardi:
>
> > Nothing exists that is worthy
> > of your emotions, and the earth deserves no sighs.
> > Our being is pain and boredom, and the world
> > is excrement—nothing else.
> > Calm yourself. (HL 1)

But this is not a risk that Nietzsche, who wants in this essay to be an advocate of life, is willing to take, and thus, in a typical *volte-face,* having used Leopardi's gloomy verses as a cadenza, he immediately modulates into a contrasting major key:

> But let us leave the suprahistorical human beings to their nausea and their wisdom: today we instead want to rejoice with all our hearts in our unwisdom and to make things easier for ourselves by playing the roles of those active and progressive people who venerate process. Our evaluation of what is historical might prove to be nothing more than an occidental prejudice, but let us at least move forward and not simply stand still in these prejudices! If we could at least learn how to pursue history better for the purpose of *life!* Then we would gladly concede that suprahistorical beings possess more wisdom than we do; at least, as long as we are certain of possessing more life. (HL 1)

In the published text the contrast between the "occidental prejudice" in favor of action and progress and "oriental" resignation is only implicit: there is no mention of Asia anywhere in the essay. But there is in the preliminary draft. Where the published text quoted above reads "given the infinite superabundance of events, how could he possibly avoid being satiated, *oversatiated, indeed, even nauseated!"* (emphasis added), the draft reads only "how could he possibly avoid being satiated!" and instead of some verses by Leopardi, there follows a sympathetic discussion of Indian thought that leads to the draft of the paragraph just quoted.

Nietzsche writes that Western scholars, frustrated by their inability to reconstruct an Indian history, and to tell, for example, whether Sāṃkhya philosophy pre or postdates Buddhism, take revenge on such "wrongheaded" people by regarding them with

contempt: "we tend to attribute their mode to the hot climate and their general indolence, but above all to their so-called 'weakness of personality': as if to live and think ahistorically must always be a sign of degeneration and stagnation." But he wonders whether it is not rather historical consciousness that is an expression of weakness: "Perhaps the Indians, in turn, perceive our craving for the historical and our esteem of 'historical' peoples and human beings to be an occidental prejudice, or perhaps even a mental illness."

Nietzsche only takes the Indians' side temporarily however; he soon returns to the side of historical human beings. Where the published text has "But let us leave the suprahistorical human beings to their nausea and their wisdom," the draft has "But let us leave the quarreling Indians: even if they might be wiser than we are…"[59] (UW 289 – 90; NF-1873, 30[2]). Yet though his support for the Indians in the draft is short lived, the differences between the draft and published texts are remarkable. It is as if Nietzsche reread the draft, and rethought his sympathetic position on "suprahistorical" Indian culture, or in any event Indian culture as seen by nineteenth century German orientalists.

Nietzsche, like Hume, is skeptical of naïve view that "since happiness is not yet there, it obviously must be on the way" (UW 231 – 2; NF-1873, 29[86]), and is aware that historical optimism may be just "an occidental prejudice," but as the only other

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59 *"Doch lassen wir die Inder zanken."* Richard Gray translates this "But let us leave the Hindus to their bickering." I have followed Gray's translation verbatim above, apart from substituting "Indian" for "Hindu." The word *"Inder" could* mean Hindu, but Nietzsche uses the German word *"Hindu"* elsewhere, and given the mention of Buddhists in the passage, "Indian" is surely the better translation. Also, Gray renders *"indischen Geschichte"* as "Hindu tale" which seems to me like a simple case of mistranslation given the context. It is clearly their inability to reconstruct an "Indian history," not a "Hindu tale" that frustrates the Western scholars that Nietzsche writes of.

option seems to be "oriental" resignation, he feels obliged to embrace the first alternative. Thus Nietzsche maps the "antithesis between life and wisdom" onto the antithesis between historical optimism and resignation (HL 1), and characteristically chooses life and unwisdom as a package deal over their opposites, just as Zarathustra does in "The Other Dancing Song" when he concedes that life is dearer to him than all his wisdom (3.15). By the time that *Zarathustra* overcomes his nausea and embraces eternal recurrence however, the antithesis is no longer between historical optimism and resignation, but between historical optimism and affirmation of the world just as it is, and so Nietzsche can accept a version of the suprahistorical view that he is compelled to reject in 1873. Yet what he does not fully appreciate is the extent to which Buddhists too, and especially Mahāyāna Buddhists reject optimism not for resignation, but rather for affirmation just as he does.

So far, I have traced the textual roots of eternal recurrence back to *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life* via the influence on Nietzsche of Schopenhauer and Hume, and I have tried to bring out the way that Nietzsche's treatment of associated ideas is shaped by his attitude to Indian culture. This almost completes my study of the early origins of recurrence, but before moving on to consider the idea under the headings of what I am calling the aesthetic, scientific, and religious approaches to the problem of impermanence, I wish to make two brief points in passing.

First it should also be mentioned here that elsewhere in Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* recurrence is anticipated in even more detail than is it in the passage containing the verses by Dryden considered above:

> [W]hat if I should revive the old *Epicurean* hypothesis? This is commonly, and I believe, justly esteemed the most absurd system, that has yet been proposed; yet, I know not, whether, with a few alterations, it might not be brought to bear a faint appearance of probability. Instead of supposing matter infinite, as *Epicurus* did, let us suppose it finite. A finite number of particles is only susceptible of finite transpositions: and it must happen, in an eternal duration, that every possible order or position must be tried an infinite number of times. This world, therefore, with all its events, even the most minute, has before been produced and destroyed, and will again be produced and destroyed, without any bounds and limitations. No one, who has a conception of the powers of infinite, in comparison of finite, will ever scruple this determination. (58 – 59)

Philo propounds this speculative argument in the course of a debate about the argument from design; the Dryden passage occurs in the course of a treatment of the problem of evil. Although Hume neither takes the above possibility very seriously, nor makes the connection between the two passages that Nietzsche does, what the context of these passages in Hume's work suggests is the extent to which Nietzsche's adoption of recurrence was prompted by religious reflections on suffering and ateleology.

Second, there is a passage in Nietzsche's juvenilia that appears to be relevant to eternal recurrence. In 1862, at the age of eighteen, Nietzsche wrote "Fate and History," his first attempt at a philosophical essay, in which it is clear that he is already losing his religious faith. "If we could look upon Christian doctrines and church-history in a free and impartial way," he opens the essay, "we would have to express several views that oppose those that are generally accepted" (NR 12). Having called into question the

Christian God's existence, he wonders "whether mankind itself is only a stage, a phase in the universal, in becoming; whether it is not merely a voluntary appearance [or an arbitrary manifestation: *eine willkürliche Erscheinung*] of God." It is extremely unclear exactly what Nietzsche has in mind here, but a couple of sentences later he writes the following: "Could it be that perfection is already attained here, that herein lies history? Has this eternal becoming no end?" (13). The details of his inchoate thoughts are unimportant; what is important is that as early as 1862 he is flirting with the notion that a promising alternative to belief in God is belief in a world of eternal becoming in which perfection has somehow already been attained. Having touched on these two points, let us now move on to consider the different approaches to the problem of impermanence.

5. Aesthetic Approaches to Impermanence: the Mythic Strategy

"Let us impress the image of eternity on *our* life!" Nietzsche writes in a note from 1881; "This thought contains more than all the religions that have taught us to despise this life as something fleeting and to look towards an indeterminate *other* life" (NR 240). Nietzsche was possessed by this idea of somehow impressing the image of eternity on life, or as he puts it in another note five years later, "[imposing] upon becoming the character of being" (WP 617). In this note he writes that this can best be done by postulating eternal recurrence: "That *everything recurs*," he claims, "is the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being.*" But in 1872 in *The Birth of*

Tragedy he argues that one can impress the image of eternity upon one's experiences by participating in mythic reenactments of events.

In *The Birth of Tragedy*—a book about the meaning of life disguised as a work of classical scholarship—Nietzsche lays out his first published effort to contend with the existential problem of impermanence, or in his words, the predicament of the individual who, "[a]mid the ceaseless flux of phenomena," suffers from the recognition "that all that comes into being must be ready for a sorrowful end" (16 – 17). His proposed solution is to adopt an attitude to life informed by Dionysian tragedy which, he claims, allays this suffering by providing its spectator with the "metaphysical comfort…that life is at the bottom of things, despite all the changes of appearances, indestructibly powerful and pleasurable." In the presence of the satyrs, "a chorus of natural beings who live ineradicably, as it were, behind all civilization and remain eternally the same, despite the changes of generations and of the history of nations," Nietzsche writes, "the gulfs between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature" (7). As Du Fu famously wrote, "The nation is ruined, but mountains and rivers remain" (Snyder 542).

Nietzsche claims that the Greeks "felt involuntarily impelled to relate all their experiences immediately to their myths," and thus that to them "even the immediate present had to appear…right away *sub specie aeterni* and in a certain sense as timeless." He weighs this mythic consciousness favorably against historical self-understanding, maintaining that "without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its

creativity;" that "only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement":

> [A]ny people—just as, incidentally, also any individual—is worth only as much as it is able to press upon its experiences the stamp of the eternal; for thus it is, as it were, desecularized and shows its unconscious inward convictions of the relativity of time and of the true, that is metaphysical, significance of life. The opposite of this happens when a people begins to comprehend itself historically and to smash the mythical works that surround it. (BT 23)

Of course, when he turns away from Wagner in his positivistic middle period works, Nietzsche privileges science over myth, and he roundly rejects all appeals to any metaphysical *Hinterwelt* to confer significance on life. But despite his commitment to process philosophy—to the view that "[i]nsofar as the senses show becoming, passing away, and change, they do not lie" (TI 3.2)—he never ceases to make use of the concept of eternity. In *The Utility and Liability of History for Life*, as we saw above it is no longer a chorus of natural beings that remains eternally the same [*ewig dieselben bleiben*], but "the past and the present" that are "one and the same…of unalterable worth and eternally identical meaning [*ewig gleicher Bedeutung*]" (1). In *Zarathustra* "[e]verything breaks" but "everything is joined anew; eternally the same house of being is built [*ewig baut sich das gleiche Haus des Seins*]" (3.13.2). And a contrast similar to the early opposition between history and myth is to be found in a late note from 1887, where he wonders whether a "pantheistic affirmation of all things" is possible: "Can we remove the idea of a goal from the process [i.e. think ahistorically] and then affirm the

process in spite of this?—This would be the case if something were attained at every moment within this process—and always the same [*und immer das Gleiche*]" (WP 55). Indeed, in her study, *Nietzsche's Thought of Eternal Return,* Joan Stambaugh astutely observes that "'Eternity' is the only traditional concept of Western metaphysics which Nietzsche did not attack or reject" (1).

In a note from the same 1881 notebook where he advocates impressing the image of eternity on life, Nietzsche suggests a related way that one might attempt to shape one's existence. "We want to experience a work of art over and over again!" he writes; "We should fashion our life in this way, so that we have the same wish with each of its parts" (NR 241). In his *Nietzsche: Life as Literature* Alexander Nehamas bases an ingenious interpretation of recurrence on this line of thought. Perhaps the ideal life would be the life most worth living again, though for aesthetic, rather than moral reasons; if so one ought to live one's life as a work of art. I take up this idea in the next section.

6. Aesthetic Approaches to Impermanence: the Narrative Strategy

"Nietzsche's view," writes Nehamas, "assimilates the ideal person to an ideal literary character and the ideal life to an ideal story" (165). He considers Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (quite possibly the *ne plus ultra* of attempts to capture a life between the pages of a book) as a model of eternal recurrence in its endlessly cyclical structure:

> In this fictional autobiography the narrator relates in enormous, painstaking detail all the silly, insignificant, pointless, accidental, sometimes horrible things he did in his rambling efforts to become an author. He writes about the time he wasted, the acquaintances he made, the views and values he accepted at different times, his changes of heart and mind, his friendships, the ways in which he treated his family, his lovers, and his servants, his attempts to enter society, the disjointed and often base motives out of which he acted, and much else besides. Yet it is just these unconnected, chance events that somehow finally enable him to become an author, to see them after all as parts of a unified pattern, the result of which is his determination to begin at last his first book. This book, he tells us, will relate in detail all the silly, insignificant, pointless, accidental, sometimes horrible things he did in his rambling efforts to become an author. It will concern the time he wasted, the acquaintances he made, the views and values he accepted at different times, his changes of heart and mind, his friendships, the ways in which he treated his family, his lovers, and his servants, his attempts to enter society, the disjointed and often base motives out of which he acted, and much else besides. It will also show how these unconnected, chance events finally enabled him to become an author, to see them after all as parts of a unified pattern, the result of which is his determination to begin at last his first book, which will relate all the pointless, accidental...—a book he has not yet begun to write but which his readers have just finished reading. (Nehamas 167 – 168)

Nehamas's choice of Proust is felicitous and the parallels he draws are intriguing. He writes that this "perfect" autobiographical novel "relates what, despite and even through its very imperfections, becomes and is seen to be a perfect life, and which keeps turning endlessly back upon itself" (168). This description tallies wonderfully well with Nietzsche's tendency to praise what is *prima facie* useless, or worse. Nothing, if only one can adopt the right perspective, need be insignificant, pointless, accidental. If it is as

an aesthetic phenomenon that existence is justified (BT 5), then since "nothing is dispensable" in an ideally structured aesthetic whole, "[n]othing in existence may be subtracted" (EH BT 2). Nietzsche's writings makes meaningful a life filled with pain; he is "born again," like Dionysus, in his work. Nehamas holds that "Nietzsche's texts...do not describe but, in exquisitely elaborate detail, *exemplify* the perfect instance of his ideal character. And this character is none other than the character these very texts constitute: Nietzsche himself....Nietzsche wanted to be, and was, the Plato of his own Socrates" (232 – 234)[60].

But although Nietzsche's highly personal prose often does give one just this impression, one cannot simply conflate the author of the texts that bear Nietzsche's name with the character that emerges from them. The author was a human being of flesh and blood that lived in the nineteenth century; the character is a fictional creation that lives on in the world of ideas. And Nietzsche warns his readers against this confusion repeatedly. In the *Genealogy*, for instance, he writes "that one does best to separate an artist from his work, not taking him as seriously as his work. He is, after all, only the precondition of his work, the womb, the soil, sometimes the dung and manure on which, out of which it grows—and therefore in most cases something one must forget if one is to enjoy the

[60] Interestingly, if we are to take him at his word in his *Autobiography*, it seems that Benjamin Franklin would have liked to relive his life: "That Felicity [with which I have gone so far thro' Life], when I reflected on it, has induc'd me sometimes to say, that were it offer'd to my Choice, I should have no Objection to a Repetition of the same Life from its Beginning, only asking the Advantages Authors have in a second Edition to correct some Faults of the first. So would I if I might, besides [correcting] the Faults, change some sinister Accidents & Events of it for others more favourable, but tho' this were deny'd, I should still accept the Offer. However, since such a Repetition is not to be expected, the Thing most like living one's Life over again, seems to be a *Recollection* of that Life, and to make that Recollection as durable as possible, the putting it down in Writing" (3 – 4).

work itself" (3.4). Nehamas is of course aware of this passage, and even quotes it earlier in his book, yet he appears to think that the challenge that it poses to his reading can somehow be met by subsuming the life in the work:

> What, then, if the work itself, in its totality, results in the construction of a character whose "biography" it turns out to be? In that case the doubt that was lingering just above [that one could model oneself on a literary character of one's own creation] may be counterbalanced by the suspicion that only the "biography" that emerges through Nietzsche's works, and not the "life" out of which they grow, is of any importance. In his eyes, at least, it is only such a character who can influence history and thought and who, like the Socrates who emerges out of Plato's dialogues, can manifest the will to power in fashioning values and modes of life. (199)

It is true that Nietzsche sometimes suggests that only his "biography" and not his "life" is important. In the epigraph to *Ecce Homo,* for instance, he writes that he had the right to bury his forty-fourth year since "whatever was life in it has been saved, is immortal." The implication seems to be that all that matters about a life can be captured between the pages of a book. And in *Daybreak* he writes that "the sciences have hitherto been kept back by the *moral narrowness* of their disciples and that henceforth they must be carried on with a higher and *more magnanimous* basic feeling. 'What do I matter!' stands over the door of the thinker of the future" (547). But the danger is that this self-sacrifice of the thinker may demand too great a self-effacement. And although art "is much more fundamentally opposed to the ascetic ideal than is science," it is "the most distinctive corruption of an artist" that he "place[s] himself in the service of the ascetic

ideal" (GM 3.25). Nietzsche of course is thinking of Wagner here, but there is a wider point about the questionability of making one's life meaningful by seizing on the rather desperate expedient of treating one's suffering as a spectacle:

> The entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education nor are we the true authors of this art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art—for it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*—while of course our consciousness of our own significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on canvas have of the battle represented on it. (BT 5)

Nietzsche returns to this early idea repeatedly. "With what eyes do you think Homer made his gods look down upon the destinies of men?" he asks in the *Genealogy*. "What was at bottom the ultimate meaning of Trojan wars and other such tragic terrors? There can be no doubt whatever: they were intended as festival plays for the gods" (2.7). And in *The Antichrist* the curious case of the Christian "is really a *spectacle for gods*" (39). But apart from the self-contempt involved in thinking of one's life merely as entertainment for bored deities, the fact that "people always *exaggerate* when they speak of pain or misfortune" (GS 326)—or at least tend to do so—means that there is a risk that one will become inauthentic in overplaying one's role. Nietzsche urges us to become who we are: to *be* somebody, not just to represent something:

> One should guard against confusion through psychological *contiguity,* to use a British term, a confusion to which an artist himself is only too prone: as if he himself were what he is able to represent, conceive, and express. The fact is that *if* he were it, he would not represent, conceive, and express it: a Homer would not have created an Achilles nor a Goethe a Faust if Homer had been an Achilles or Goethe a Faust. Whoever is completely and wholly an artist is to all eternity separated from the "real," the actual; on the other hand, one can understand how he may sometimes weary to the point of desperation of the eternal "unreality" and falsity of his innermost existence. (GM 3.4)

In other words, persons who try to give meaning to their lives by turning them into performance art are in danger of ending up as nothing but play-actors, even to themselves. If, as seems undeniable, we are irreducibly social animals, then there is no such thing as a meaningful life without meaningful relationships. But there is more to a meaningful relationship than the mere making of an impression, however great, and beyond a certain point, the desire to make an impression begins to make meaningful relationships very difficult. In any event, there is more to self-actualization than the putting on of even the most brilliant of displays as a writer or a raconteur, as the following memorable journal entry of Kierkegaard's bears out:

> I have just come back from a party where I was the life and soul. Witticisms flowed from my lips. Everybody laughed and admired me—but I left, yes, that dash should be as long as the radii of the earth's orbit————and wanted to shoot myself. (50)

Arguably, Nehamas does not take seriously enough the simple truth that the narrator of *À la recherche du temps perdu* is not identical to its author, and that the character portrayed in *Ecce Homo* and elsewhere is not identical to Nietzsche. Nietzsche is "the Plato of his own Socrates" (Nehamas 234) *only* from the point of view of his reader, and not, crucially, from Nietzsche's own perspective. The character Nietzsche is the being-for-others of the person Nietzsche, in Sartrean terms, and can never be equated with his being-for-himself. That Marcel creates himself in and through the story he tells is just a pervasive textual illusion: such a feat of self-origination is *literarily* possible, but literally *impossible.* Proust creates Marcel, and the *person* Nietzsche creates the *character* Nietzsche; but neither Proust nor Nietzsche creates himself. It is nonsensical, as Nietzsche says in another context, to want to be *causa sui* and "with more than Münchhausen's audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness" (BGE 21). A self-referential work may be structurally circular and endless, but its author's life is temporally linear and finite. Sartre alludes to the unviability of the Proustian project in *Nausea,* a central theme of which is the unbridgeable gulf between life and art:

> This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his own life as if he were telling a story.
>
> But you have to choose: live or tell….
>
> Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days

> without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition. From time to time you make a semi-total: you say: I've been travelling for three years, I've been in Bouville for three years. Neither is there any end: you never leave a woman, a friend, a city in one go….
>
> That's living. But everything changes when you tell about life; it's a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense….
>
> I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered. You might as well try and catch time by the tail. (39 – 40)

Of course, Roquentin, the narrator of *Nausea,* is not a character whose way of living Nietzsche would admire, and both Nietzsche and Nehamas could object that the complaint that life is not like art misses completely the point that living *just is* the creative imposition of order on chaos by strong individuals. Even so, the fact that the artistic impulse is not necessarily opposed to the ascetic ideal, that there is a kind of aestheticism of *ressentiment,* is vividly brought out in the closing pages of *Nausea.* Roquentin, listening to a jazz song and reflecting that it justifies the existence of its author and its singer, dreams of revenging himself on life by slandering the world with a work of art, as Nietzsche might have put it:

> She sings. So two of them are saved: the Jew and the Negress. Saved. Maybe they thought they were lost irrevocably, drowned in existence. Yet no one could think of me as I think of them, with such gentleness….They are a little like dead people for me, a little like the heroes of a novel; they have washed themselves of the sin of existing. Not completely, of course, but as much as any man

> can….Couldn't I try….Naturally, it wouldn't be a question of a tune…but couldn't I, in another medium?... [last three ellipses in original] It would have to be a book: I don't know how to do anything else....I don't quite know which kind—but you would have to guess, behind the printed words, behind the pages, at something which would not exist, which would be above existence. A story, for example, something that could never happen, an adventure. It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel and make people ashamed of their existence. (177 – 178)

Roquentin's fantasy of effacing himself by disappearing into a book can never be fully realized. To the extent that one succeeds in putting oneself into one's work, one does not escape from the task of living, but only complicates one's life by generating a public persona, a second self with whom one now must enter into an undecidable interchange. "Borges and I" by Jorge Luis Borges is the classic treatment of this theme:

> It would be an exaggeration to say that our relationship is a hostile one; I live, I go on living, so that Borges may contrive his literature; and that literature justifies me. I do not find it hard to admit that he has achieved some valid pages, but these pages can not save me, perhaps because what is good no longer belongs to anyone, not even to him, the other one, but to the language or to tradition. In any case, I am destined to perish, definitively, and only some instant of me may live on in him. (Borges 246)

A literary doppelganger can complicate an author's life, or enrich it immeasurably, but, as Borges notes, it cannot *save* it. A great work of art is like a piece of the world that has broken off from it, and that exists suspended in its own ideal space

in a kind of aesthetic aseity. It is complete unto itself in a way that a life—while it is being lived—can never be. *"Above all, do not mistake me for someone else,"* pleads Nietzsche (EH Preface 1). "I am one thing, my writings are another matter" (EH 3.1). Owing to what Heidegger calls *Geworfenheit,* or "thrownness," an autobiography clearly cannot be begun at the beginning: "The first thing I remember is being under something," is how Charles Bukowski opens *Ham on Rye,* the story of his early life (9). Neither can it be ended at the end, since dead men tell no tales.

The paradoxically perfect exemplar of the human condition as "a never to be perfected imperfect" (HL 1) is perhaps less *À la recherche du temps perdu* than one of Nietzsche's "earliest favorites" (BW 795), *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman.* Wishing to outdo Goethe, who called him "the most liberated spirit of his century," at one point Nietzsche calls Sterne "simply…the most liberated spirit of all time" (AOM 113). This is uniquely high praise from Nietzsche for an Englishman, even one of Irish extraction.

Tristram Shandy is often characterized by critics as a postmodern novel *avant la lettre,* and a number of existentialist and postmodernist thinkers differ from Nehamas in regarding recurrence as an "anti-narrative" thought. On this view, since there is no God, there is no inherent direction to history as Hegel thought, and thus no grand narratives are pre-given in terms of which we can structure our lives. Any narrative coherence which our lives do exhibit will be merely provisional and contingent: the result of a process of prioritizing and selecting that necessarily involves an element of arbitrariness. We construct a "self" by highlighting certain events in our past and downplaying others, but

this self is really just a self image: partial, unstable, and always subject to revision depending on how things unfold. This immanentist reading of eternal recurrence is summarized nicely by Gary Shapiro below:

> [W]hat unites Zarathustra and Nietzsche's Jesus is a break with that metanarrativist style of thought that requires a notion of first and last things. For both, the totality of experience is sufficient unto itself and stands in no need of external explanations.[61]The eternal recurrence is opposed to traditional narrative thought because it knows no isolated agents in the sequence of all events, but only the interconnection of events; it knows no beginning, middle, and end of the narrative but simply the continuous fabric of becoming; and it tends to dissolve the mainstay of conventional narrative, the individual agent, into the ring of becoming. (139)[62]

Shapiro reveals the influence here of the French Nietzscheans and the concept of the absurd, or the pointlessness of an existence in which, in Edna St. Vincent Millay's famous formulation, "It's not true that life is one damn thing after another—it's one damn thing over and over." "The return of the same does not alter itself—but does so absolutely—except by amounting to the same," writes Derrida in typically paradoxical style. "Pure repetition, were it to change neither thing nor sign, carries with it an unlimited power of perversion and subversion" (373). Derrida's point here, if I understand him, is almost the opposite of the one that Kundera makes at the beginning of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* For Kundera, "a life which disappears once and for

[61] Compare Manu Bazzano's elegant articulation of the same idea in *Buddha is Dead:* "The plenitude of becoming is all there is. It is all that we will ever need, and it is manifesting at every instant" (41).
[62] Nehamas actually cites an earlier version of this passage in an endnote (250n19).

all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing" (3). For Derrida, an event which might have seemed meaningful if it had occurred only once may be deprived of all meaningfulness by being indefinitely repeated. The thought that what one is experiencing is absolutely unoriginal threatens the value of the experience, and just as imitation can make a mockery of a person, repetition can make a mockery of a life.

Derrida is drawing on Pierre Klossowski, who, in his classic study *Nietzsche and the Vicious Circle,* observes that the "circle opens me to inanity" and that meanings are only provisionally generated by *"a moving chaos without beginning or end"* (62 – 64). Contemplating Zarathustra's "most abysmal thought" (3.13.1), a "feeling of vertigo results from the once and for all in which the subject is surprised by the dance of innumerable times: the once-and-for-all disappears," writes Klossowski. "At the level of consciousness, meaning and goal are lost. They are everywhere and nowhere in the Vicious Circle, since there is no point on the Circle that cannot be both the beginning and end" (72). Ultimately all these interpretations can be traced back to Camus's absurdist reading of the myth of Sisyphus, which itself displays a deep affinity with the idea of eternal return.

Nietzsche does periodically adopt the kind of aestheticism emphasized by Nehamas in his study, and has many positive things to say about the role of art in life; but he retreats from his early claim that existence is *justified* as an aesthetic phenomenon (BT

5), perhaps because, despite his rejection of hedonistic axiology, he cannot dispel the mocking ghost of Schopenhauer:

> To this world the attempt has been made to adapt the system of optimism, and to demonstrate to us that it is the best of all possible worlds. The absurdity is glaring. However an optimist tells me to open my eyes and look at the world and see how beautiful it is in the sunshine, with its mountains, valleys, rivers, plants, animals, and so on. But is the world, then, a peep-show? These things are certainly beautiful to behold, but to be them is something quite different. (*World* 2: 581)

It seems clear that this passage, or another one like it, is behind a rather wistful aphorism from *Human, All Too Human.* "What is it that we long for at the sight of beauty?" Nietzsche asks. "To be beautiful ourself: we imagine we would be very happy if we were beautiful.—But that is an error" (149). In *The Gay Science* he praises "art as the *good* will to appearance," which rewards those who do not demand too much of it, as, presumably, his earlier self did. "As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be *able* to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon," he continues. But this more moderate aestheticism is only a respite, to be resorted to at times when "we need a rest from ourselves by looking upon, by looking *down* upon, ourselves…from an artistic distance" (107). And Nehamas's thoroughgoing aestheticism, according to which "only the 'biography' that emerges through Nietzsche's works, and not the 'life' out of which they grow, is of any importance" (199), is too close to self-abnegation to serve as a solution to

the kinds of problems with which Nietzsche was wrestling. "I am nothing, my work is everything," is the motto of a kind of asceticism, and one cannot promote a philosophy of life-affirmation by attributing to life itself only a kind of instrumental artistic value.

I think it is fair to say that for Nietzsche *creativity* is valuable for its own sake, and not merely for the sake of the bringing creative works into existence, though it is valuable for this reason too. An analogy from environmental philosophy may help illuminate this point. "Value lies in processes as well as in products," as Holmes Rolston writes, in defending a holistic ethic:

> To value individuals among the fauna and flora and not the evolutionary and ecological processes is like valuing the eggs that the golden goose produces more than the goose able to produce them. It would be a mistake to value the goose only instrumentally. A goose that lays golden eggs is systemically valuable. (524)

Despite Nietzsche's warning against taking artists too seriously since sometimes they are only the "dung and manure" out of which their work grows (GM 3.4), sometimes we do value artists on account of their work, but not just on account of their ability to produce it. The respect one feels for a great artist who is no longer active in his or her old age, for example, cannot be explained in terms of instrumental value. The value of creativity as such can be brought out by contrasting it with *productivity;* unlike in the case of an artist *qua* artist, a machine *is* only valued on account of its ability to manufacture goods. To adopt the motto "I am nothing, my work is everything" is to take

a rather joyless approach to creative activity; an approach more in keeping with Nietzsche's ideal would assimilate creation to play, not work. The difference is that as well as creative play being valuable because the world is enriched by its creations, it is also valuable experientially for itself.

This insistence on the value of process *qua* process is central to Nietzsche's thinking about recurrence. In the following sections I will take up two forms of the cosmological version of the doctrine of eternal recurrence, according to which reality at its most basic level is thought of as an endlessly cyclical process of dynamic change.

7. Scientific Approaches to Impermanence: the Strong Cosmological Version of Eternal Recurrence

In a number of unpublished notes, Nietzsche tinkers with some unpersuasive attempts to prove the literal truth of eternal recurrence based on the idea that if time is infinite, and the number of objects in space finite, each configuration, and thus each sequence of configurations, must repeat itself an infinite number of times. This line of reasoning first occurs in 1881 and shows up now and again in his notes throughout the 1880s. The following sketch from 1888—which is highly reminiscent of the anti-teleological passage from Hume's *Dialogues* quoted earlier in which Hume considers an scenario inspired by Epicurus—is a typical example of an argument for the so-called cosmological version of recurrence:

> If the world may be thought of as a certain definite quantity of force and as a certain definite number of centers force—and every other representation remains indefinite and therefore useless—it follows that, in the great dice game of existence, it must pass through a calculable number of combinations. In infinite time, every possible combination would at some time or another be realized; more: it would be realized an infinite number of times. And since between every combination and its next recurrence all other possible combinations would have to take place, and each of these combinations conditions the entire sequence of combinations in the same series, a circular movement of absolutely identical series is thus demonstrated: the world as a circular movement that has already repeated itself infinitely often and plays its game *in infinitum.* (WP 1066)

But even assuming that Nietzsche is right, and that time is infinite and the number of objects in space finite, it is not necessary that every configuration be repeated, as Georg Simmel famously demonstrated by constructing a simple counterexample. In a footnote in his *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* he imagines three wheels of equal size rotating on the same axis. If the second wheel rotates at twice the speed of the first, and the third at $1/\pi$ times its speed, the system will never regain its initial position (172 – 3). Indeed, few Nietzsche scholars have been impressed by the view that *identical* sequences of states of the universe as a whole are repeated *ad infinitum.* Lawrence Hatab sums up a number of the major objections that have been brought against the cosmological version:

> [E]ternal recurrence is intrinsically unverifiable and indemonstrable because there is no extra-cyclic vantage point from which any relationship between cycles (causal or otherwise) could be ascertained; and even if it were possible, cross-

> cyclic relations would "add" to repeated occurrent events and thus ruin their supposed "identity." For the same reason, any recollection of previous cycles is ruled out because a remembered event would be discernibly different from the event itself. (115 – 116)

Perhaps there are responses to these objections, but it is not my purpose to offer such responses here. In any event, the best explanation of the fact that although there are multiple sketches of the cosmological version of recurrence in Nietzsche's notebooks, none of them make it into his published work seems to be that Nietzsche himself was unhappy with the cosmological version. This inference would be unjustified if it only appeared once or twice in his notes, but never in his books: that could be explained on the hypothesis that he simply found it unimportant, but not necessarily defective. But that he keeps returning to tweak the cosmological version in his notes suggests that he did find it defective. Moreover, in *The Utility and Liability of History for Life,* he briefly considers the cosmological version only to dismiss it as absurd:

> Basically, in fact, what was possible once could only become possible a second time if the Pythagoreans were correct in believing that when an identical constellation of the heavenly bodies occurs, identical events—down to individual, minute details—must repeat themselves on the earth as well; so that whenever the stars have a particular relation to each other, a Stoic will join forces with an Epicurean to murder Caesar, and whenever they are in another configuration Columbus will discover America….This is unlikely to happen until astronomers have once again become astrologers. (2)

But this *strong* cosmological theory of the recurrence of *identical* events can be distinguished from a much more plausible weaker theory according to which the universe never "runs down," but *similar* events are endlessly repeated in a "world of forces [that] suffers no cessation" (NR 240). To this theory I now turn.

8. Scientific Approaches to Impermanence: the Weak Cosmological Version of Eternal Recurrence

At times Nietzsche attempts to formulate this weak cosmological theory, according to which "existence as it is, without meaning or aim [recurs] inevitably without any finale of nothingness" as "the most *scientific* of all possible hypotheses." "We deny end goals: if existence had one it would have to have been reached," he continues immediately after having claimed scientific status for his view (WP 55). Alexander Nehamas takes this denial of end goals to be a gloss on the preceding sentence, concluding that by "scientific" Nietzsche here means strictly nonteleological (145). Assuming Nehamas's reading is correct—and the placing of the sentences suggests that it is—it is possible that Nietzsche is here confusing final states with final causes: it *is* unscientific to think of the universe as *aiming* at some final state, but there is nothing unscientific about the hypothesis that it is *tending inevitably* towards one; indeed at present that is the prevailing scientific view.

But even disregarding this possible confusion on Nietzsche's part, his categorical rejection of end states is scientifically questionable. Nietzsche was familiar with the physics of his time, including the work of Clausius and Kelvin on thermodynamics, but he appears to have been reluctant to accept results that were inconsistent with his favorite hypothesis.

He writes in one note that the "law of the conservation of energy demands *eternal recurrence*" (WP 1063), but this claim seems to be based on a crude misunderstanding: it is only total energy in a closed system that is conserved over time, not *free energy*, or the energy available to do work. And since it looks as though the law of entropy demands the falsity of recurrence as a scientific hypothesis, Nietzsche is reluctant to accept the law of entropy. His argument that this law is false is based on two premises: Aristotle's formulation of the principle of plenitude, according to which every possibility is actualized given infinite time; and the claim that since there is no contradiction in the concept "temporal infinity of the world in the past," one may assume that the universe is in fact beginningless; that "it has never begun to become":

> Nothing can prevent me from reckoning backward from this moment and saying "I shall never reach the end"; just as I can reckon forward from the same moment into the infinite. Only if I made the mistake—I shall guard against it—of equating this correct concept of a *regressus in infinitum* with an utterly unrealizable concept of a finite *progressus* up to this present [would I contradict myself]. (WP 1066)

But one of the few areas in which Nietzsche was not gifted was mathematics—his mathematics teacher at Schulpforta actually wanted to deny him a leaving certificate—and here he guards against the wrong mistake of equating an infinite regress with a finite progression, and fails to see that the relevant difference between the possibility of reckoning backward and forward is that the former necessitates an actual infinity of past events, whereas the latter only requires a potential infinity of future ones. Nevertheless, although the concept of an actual infinity of past events is problematic, it is certainly not universally agreed that it is contradictory. So *perhaps* Nietzsche is right that past time is infinite, and *perhaps* he is right that if so, then "if the world could reach a state of equilibrium…then this state must have been reached" (WP 1066). This would follow given Aristotle's principle of plenitude. Granting these premises, it is conceivable that "every philosophy and scientific hypothesis (e.g. mechanistic theory) which necessitates…a final state is *refuted*" (WP 708). Nietzsche's argument, which is scattered in different notes, could be reconstructed as follows:

1. The universe is a causally closed system, and is infinite in past time.
2. Over the course of an infinite period of time, whatever can happen does happen.
3. Thus if it were possible for the universe to reach a state of equilibrium, it would already have done so.
4. But if the universe had reached a state of equilibrium in the past, it would still be in a state of equilibrium at present, since given that it is a causally closed system, no external influence could disrupt that equilibrium.

5. Hence it is not possible for the universe to reach a state of equilibrium.

6. But the second law of thermodynamics entails that given sufficient time it is possible for the universe to reach a state of equilibrium.

7. Therefore the second law of thermodynamics is false.

But Nietzsche is on very shaky ground here in employing such highly speculative premises. The scientific evidence for the second law of thermodynamics is overwhelmingly strong, whereas the past infinitude of the universe is just a conjecture, and the principle of plenitude is a disputed philosophical claim. Few physicists, if any, would take issue with Eddington's assertion in the following often-quoted passage from *The Nature of the Physical World:*

> The law that entropy always increases—the second law of thermodynamics—holds, I think, the supreme position among the laws of Nature. If someone points out to you that your pet theory of the universe is in disagreement with Maxwell's equations—then so much the worse for Maxwell's equations. If it is found to be contradicted by observation—well, these experimentalists do bungle things sometimes. But if your theory is found to be against the second law of thermodynamics I can give you no hope; there is nothing for it but to collapse in deepest humiliation. (74)

In short, withholding assent from the second law of thermodynamics is a high price to pay for anybody who wishes—as Nietzsche does—to take the scientific

worldview seriously. If a valid argument leads to the conclusion that it is false, one would do better to call its premises into question.

In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche takes philosophers to task for their way of presenting an opinion as disinterested and objective, "while at bottom it is an assumption, a hunch, indeed a kind of 'inspiration'—most often a desire of the heart that has been filtered and made abstract—that they defend with reasons they have sought after the fact" (5). The following lines by Duncan Large suggest that Nietzsche's own opinion that the "world of forces does not suffer diminution" (NR 240) appears to be a case in point:

> Nietzsche…would not face up to the [second law of thermodynamics] and rejected its consequences. He abhorred the irreversible increase of entropy, the levelling of thermal difference, the qualitative erosion of energy and its capacity to produce motive power, the spectre of the heat death of the universe. As Deleuze reminds us, Nietzsche's version of heat death is nihilism—indifferentiation, the abolition of any individual perspective, any superior evaluation, any active force. (153)

In Nietzsche's defense, it bears repeating that he never published any of his arguments for either the strong or the weak cosmological version of recurrence, presumably because he realized that they were unsatisfactory. And it was not hunches and "inspiration" per se that he criticized, but their disingenuous presentation as the conclusions of presuppositionless arguments. Yet despite the apparent conflict of eternal recurrence with the second law of thermodynamics, and his rash assertion that if "the mechanistic theory cannot avoid the consequence…of leading to a final state, then the

mechanistic theory stands refuted" (WP 1066), it is conceivable that Nietzsche's hunch was right, and that something like the weak cosmological version of recurrence *is* actually true.

According to the standard cosmological model, the universe began approximately 15 billion years ago with the big bang, has been expanding and cooling ever since, and will continue to do so until it reaches a state of maximum entropy popularly called the big freeze. But cosmology is a young and a very uncertain science, and the cyclic or oscillatory theory of a "bouncing universe" that expands and contracts, possibly without beginning or end, is enjoying a moderate comeback at the moment.[63] Theoretical physicists Paul J. Steinhardt and Neil Turok have proposed a cyclic model of the universe based on string theory that has been well received by such distinguished scientists as Martin Rees and Stephen Hawking. And Roger Penrose has even argued that a cyclic model, far from being inconsistent with the second law, may in fact be necessary to solve a conundrum that it gives rise to:

> According to the Second Law, roughly speaking, the entropy of the universe increases with time, where the term "entropy" refers to an appropriate measure of *disorder* or lack of "specialness" of the state of the universe. Since the entropy increases in the future direction of time, it must decrease in the past time-direction. Accordingly, the initial state of the universe must be the most special of all, so any proposal for the actual nature of this initial state must account for its extreme specialness. (2759)

[63] See *Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang—Rewriting Cosmic History*, by Paul J. Steinhardt and Neil Turok.

Penrose contends that the initial low entropy state of the universe could be accounted for by what he calls the "outrageous" proposal of a cyclic cosmology according to which "both in the remote future and at the Big-Bang origin, the two situations are [arguably] *physically identical*, so the remote future of one phase of the universe becomes the Big Bang of the next" (2761). In short, what Penrose is suggesting is that a cyclical cosmology solves the problem of accounting for the initial state of this universe by explaining it the result of the final state of the universe that preceded it in an infinite series of universes.[64] Or in other words, not the first law of thermodynamics, as Nietzsche suggested, but rather the second law, demands eternal recurrence!

All of this of course, like much of cosmology, is highly speculative, and could eventually be experimentally disconfirmed, although the scientific jury is still very much out. But the same cannot be said of the jury of Nietzsche scholars who remain—rightly in my view—unconvinced by the case for the strong cosmological version of recurrence. The weak cosmological version, on the other hand, has some plausibility, and is of great significance in terms of Nietzsche's attitude to the philosophical tradition that he inherited. In espousing recurrence, Nietzsche means to reject established Western views of the temporal nature of the universe—including the Platonic conception of an unchanging world of forms behind the changing world of appearances, and the Christian conception of a unique creation and destruction of the world—for a picture that has more in common with the model of "multiple universes that pass in and out of existence"

[64] Of course, as every student of the cosmological argument knows, this move is open to the objection that it does not provide any explanation of that fact that an infinite series of universes exists in the first place.

(Lopez 42) over unimaginably vast intervals of time that is familiar from classical Buddhist cosmology.

For Nietzsche, reflection on the weak cosmological version of eternal recurrence can be extremely depressing: "Duration 'in vain,' without end or aim, is the most paralyzing idea," he writes, calling it "the most extreme form of nihilism," and the "European form of Buddhism" (WP 55). He adopts an attitude of *amor fati* in order to transform this extreme nihilism into its antithesis, so that recurrence becomes the "highest formula of affirmation" (EH Z 1). But it can be argued that, contrary to what Nietzsche thought, the purpose of *non*-European Buddhist praxis is to effect a similar transformation. The time has now come to discuss what I am calling religious strategies for dealing with the existential problem of impermanence. In the following section I will examine some aspects of Heidegger's interpretation of eternal recurrence based mainly on a reading of the chapter "On Redemption" from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* and in the sections subsequent to that, I will offer a reading of recurrence that is informed by the thinking of Dōgen and Zen Buddhism.

9. Religious Approaches to Impermanence: the Overcoming of Ill Will against Time

"Despite all the problems, contradictions, and diverse possible interpretations of Nietzsche's thought of eternal return, one thing about it is indisputable," writes Joan

Stambaugh. "Its basic meaning, stated in a neutral fashion, is that there is no finality" (*Nietzsche's Thought of Eternal Return* 112). Nietzsche of course belongs firmly in the tradition of process philosophy broadly construed, a tradition that can be traced back to Heraclitus, the Presocratic philosopher whom he most admired. Although he may not have a well worked-out temporal metaphysics, Nietzsche clearly maintains that sequences of changes are in some sense ontologically more basic than substances, and views time as dynamic, not static, or as essentially tensed, despite the conceptual problems raised by the idea of the "flow" of time. "Insofar as the senses show becoming, passing away, and change, they do not lie," he writes (TI 3.2). For Nietzsche, the experience of temporal passage, and thus impermanence, is central to the human condition, and the way one responds to the phenomenon of impermanence serves largely to define the kind of person one is. In *Zarathustra*, he writes in "On the Tarantulas," "*that man be delivered from revenge*, that is for me the bridge to the highest hope, and a rainbow after long storms" (2.7). And in "On Redemption" he defines revenge as "the will's ill will against time and its 'it was'":

> "It was"—that is the name of the will's gnashing of teeth and most secret melancholy. Powerless against what has been done, he is an angry spectator of all that is past. The will cannot will backwards; and that he cannot break time and time's covetousness, that is the will's loneliest melancholy….Because there is suffering in those who will, inasmuch as they cannot will backwards, willing itself and all life were supposed to be—a punishment. (Z 2.20)

Kathleen Higgins argues persuasively that Christians in whom there is a strong sense of unworthiness will be most disposed to feel powerless and angry in the face of the past, as it is the inaccessible "location of the sin that establishes [their] guilt" (*Nietzsche's Zarathustra* 174); though everybody who has ever wished that something had turned out differently—and the issue need not be a moral one—is likely to feel uneasy about the past to some extent.

One possible response to the asymmetry of time—to what Arthur Eddington called "time's arrow"—is a kind of passivity or "resignationism." "Unless the will should at last redeem himself, and willing should become not willing," according to this approach, there can be no "redemption from the flux of things and from the punishment called existence" (Z 2.20). But Zarathustra rejects this Schopenhauerian "fable of madness," and argues obscurely that rather than attempting to negate the will, one should attempt retrospectively to extend its range: "To redeem those who lived in the past and to recreate all 'it was' into a 'thus I willed it'—that alone should I call redemption" (2.20). He urges, not just the acceptance, but the active affirmation of temporal passage, since "that will which is the will to power must will something higher than any reconciliation" with time (2.20), and he seems to believe that the way to bring this about is by embracing eternal recurrence. And Nietzsche, as we have already seen above, writes in an unpublished note that to "impose upon becoming the character of being…is the supreme will to power" and that the "high point of [his] meditation" is the thought that a world in which "*everything recurs* is the closest *approximation of a world of becoming to a world*

of being" (WP 617). But Heidegger asks a pertinent question in his essay "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?":

> Does such thinking overcome prior reflection, overcome the spirit of revenge? Or does there not lie concealed in this very *stamping*—which takes all Becoming into the protection of eternal recurrence of the same—a form of ill will *against* sheer transiency and thereby a highly spiritualized spirit of revenge? (*Nietzsche* 2: 228)

The "philosophers," from "hatred of the very idea of becoming" (TI 3.1) in effect say "Stay!" to what they love, whereas Nietzsche says "[G]o, but return!" (Z 4.19.10), but Heidegger makes the by now familiar deconstructionist point that Nietzsche's strategy may not represent as radical a departure from the tradition as he imagines. Luce Irigaray, in her *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, also has her imaginary titular interlocutor censure Nietzsche on this issue: "For every hour, in its firstness, its uniqueness, pleases me. And when everything starts again, already (I) am gone elsewhere. Whole (I) shall be at every moment, and every whole moment. And he who repeats so that time will come back has already separated himself from time" (11). She hints at a psychoanalytic reading of recurrence as an attempt to repress the memory of birth, and deny dependence on the "m/other": "And your whole will, your eternal recurrence, are these anything more than the dream of one who neither wants to have been born, nor to continue being born, at every instant, of a female other? Does your joy

in becoming not result from annihilating her from whom you are tearing yourself away?" (26 – 27).

Irigaray's interpretation is admittedly fanciful, but it is not without some textual support. There is a curious discrepancy between Nietzsche's acknowledgement of ontological interdependence and his strained, and arguably pathological, insistence on an almost total personal independence. "Ah, that I were dark and nocturnal!" cries Zarathustra, "How I would suck at the breasts of light!...But I live in my own light; I drink back into myself the flames that break out of me" (2.9). It is hardly controversial to point out that there are passages in Nietzsche that go beyond mere narcissism. Recall that in "Upon the Blessed Isles", as was mentioned above, Zarathustra asks "*if* there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god!" (2.2). In his more sober moments Nietzsche argues that to wish to be *causa sui* is nonsensical, although "the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense" (BGE 21), but in more ecstatic moods he appears to flirt with this desire himself:

> Whoever has endeavored with some enigmatic longing, as I have, to think pessimism through to its depths…may just thereby, without really meaning to do so, have opened his eyes to the opposite ideal: the ideal of the most high-spirited, alive, and world affirming human being who has not only come to terms and learned to get along with whatever was and is, but who wants to have *what was and is* repeated into all eternity, shouting insatiably *da capo*—not only to himself but to the whole play and spectacle, and not only to a spectacle but at bottom to him who needs precisely this spectacle—and who makes it necessary because again and again he needs himself—and makes himself necessary—What? And wouldn't this be—*circulus vitiosus deus* [a vicious circle as God]? (BGE 56)

Apart from this cryptic notion that if one accepts recurrence there is a sense in which one could see oneself as self-caused (since one is as one is in any given cycle of existence because one was as one was in the previous one *ad infinitum*), there is another slightly less odd sense in which the person who embraces recurrence becomes Godlike. Heraclitus claims that "to God all things are fair and just but men have supposed some things to be unjust and others just" (Barnes 71; Fragment B 102). Thus for Heraclitus, and for Nietzsche too it seems, to the extent that one sees all things as fair and just, one approaches a God's eye view on the world.

It could be argued that only an omnipotent being—or a being without any desires whatsoever—could honestly say that he or she wants absolutely nothing to be different. Perhaps only a god would *"crave nothing more fervently"* (GS 341) than the infinite repetition of his or her life *exactly* as it is. I might be able to live as though what does not kill *me* makes me stronger but in what sense, for example, could I affirm unconditionally the acidental killing *by me* of my own child, to take just one arbitrarily chosen catastrophe from among the countless horrors that befall humankind?[65] If the *Übermensch* is by definition a person who can adopt such an affirmative attitude, then he or she may perhaps be more inhuman than superhuman, as Magnus et al. note:

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[65] Consider this example provided by Alvin Plantinga: "Sometimes evil displays a cruelly ironic twist. I recall a story in the local paper a few years ago about a man who drove a cement mixer truck. He came home one day for lunch; his three year old daughter was playing in the yard, and after lunch, when he jumped into his truck and backed out, he failed to notice that she was playing behind it; she was killed beneath the great dual wheels. One can imagine this man's broken-hearted anguish. And if he was a believer in God, he may have become furiously angry with God—who after all could have forestalled this calamity in a thousand different ways. So why *didn't* he?…Christians must concede that we don't know" ("A Christian Life Partly Lived" 70).

> Only God and *Übermenschen* love each moment unconditionally, want nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. *Only for God, Leibniz and Übermenschen* is this the best of all possible worlds. And Nietzsche was right to characterize this as his most abysmal thought; for it is abysmal! (*Nietzsche's Case* 30)

Whether *amor fati* is an unfathomably bad idea, or just an unfathomable one, is a legitimate question, but in any event, it was formulated in response to a pressing existential problem. "The everlasting and exclusive coming-to-be, the impermanence of everything actual, which constantly acts and comes-to-be but never is, as Heraclitus teaches it, is a terrible, paralyzing thought," Nietzsche wrote in *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks,* an unpublished 1873 text based on notes for a lecture course. He compared the typical reaction to the thought to the alarm produced by an earthquake, and claimed that it "takes astonishing strength to transform this reaction into its opposite, into sublimity and the feeling of blessed astonishment" (NR 108).[66] With his formulation, years later, of the idea of recurrence, Nietzsche means to see if he himself is strong enough to affirm the passing away of everything that exists in time. "Zarathustra once

[66] In the spring of 1887, Nietzsche witnessed an actual earthquake in Nice. He mockingly describes "the interesting expectation that *we shall perish*" as one of the "more seldom tasted delights of life" in a slightly posturing letter to Reinhart von Seydlitz dated February 24: "What fun, when the old houses rattle overhead like coffee mills! when the ink bottle assumes a life of its own! when the streets fill with half-dressed figures and shattered nervous systems….Last night between two and three o'clock, *comme gaillard* as I am, I toured the various districts of the town to see where the fear is greatest….[E]xcept for an old, very pious lady, who is convinced that the good lord is not entitled to do her any harm, I was the only cheerful person in a crowd of masks and 'feeling hearts'" (SL 263). A month later, however, on March 24, in a letter to his close friend Franz Overbeck, he sounds a different note: "The fourth floor of the Pension de Genève, in which the third and fourth parts of my *Zarathustra* were written, is now being dismantled, after the irreparable damage done to it by the earthquake. This transience of things hurts me" (SL 265).

defines, quite strictly, his task—it is mine, too—and there is no mistaking his meaning," he writes in *Ecce Homo:* "he says Yes to the point of justifying, of redeeming even all of the past" (EH Z 8). Even God, it is said, cannot change the past, but Nietzsche sets himself to revalue it.

What took place in the past is "over and done with," and so seems unimportant compared to what is taking place now. The significance it does have can be defined in terms of its actual or potential effect on the present or the future. It may be that the fundamental laws of nature do not require—or perhaps do not even permit—the objective reality of temporal passage; that for "those…who believe in physics," as Einstein famously stated, "the distinction between past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion" (113); but no conceptual knowledge of the laws of nature can undermine the force of the first personal experience that grounds presentism, or the philosophical view that only present entities are real, and that in some sense, future and past ones are not. Since it is impossible to change the past, it can be argued that it is reasonable not to concern oneself emotionally with it. "Things past redress are now with me past care," as York exclaims in *Richard II* (2.3). Milan Kundera takes up this idea during his treatment of recurrence in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being.* In the opening section, he suggests that "[w]e need take no more note of [a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return] than of a war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century, a war that altered nothing in the destiny of the world, even if a hundred thousand blacks perished in excruciating torment" (3).

From the premises that present events will be past before long, and that past events "do not matter," it does not follow that present events do not matter, any more than it follows from the fact that it will be the weekend soon that it is the weekend now. But it does follow that present events will cease to matter in time, and thus are not of enduring importance. This is the basic thrust of a familiar argument that is common to Platonism and Christianity, an argument that Nietzsche wants to parry. "Against the value of that which remains eternally the same," he wants to advocate "the values of the briefest and most transient, the seductive flash of gold on the belly of the serpent *vita"* (WP 577). But his attempt to privilege the evanescent over the enduring appears to be self-defeating:

> A certain emperor always bore in mind the transitoriness of all things so as not to take them too seriously and to live at peace among them. To me, on the contrary, everything seems far too valuable to be so fleeting: I seek an eternity for everything: ought one to pour the most precious salves and wines into the sea?—My consolation [*Trost*] is that everything that has been is eternal: the sea will cast it up again. (WP 1065)

Otherworldly metaphysicians devalue the world of becoming in contrasting it to the world of being. Nietzsche endeavors to revalue the impermanent by conferring a kind of surrogate permanence on it by means of eternal recurrence. But in making this move, which suggests that pure impermanence is ontologically deficient and in need of some kind of "redemption," he implicitly concurs with the Platonic evaluation and unwittingly

concedes the point. His aspiration to "dispatch all metaphysical comforts [*Trösterei*] to the devil" (BT Self-Criticism 6) is not that easy to live up to.

One might even say that Nietzsche so loved the world that he sought to eternalize the ephemeral. He places such value on "everything that has been" that he cannot bear to see anything disappear forever, and thus wants to impress upon events the image of eternity (NR 240). But the binary opposition between being and becoming resists being synthesized in any type of Hegelian *Aufhebung;* to confer permanence on the impermanent by way of recurrence seems tantamount to annihilating it completely *qua impermanence*. Thus "each man kills the thing he loves," as Oscar Wilde laments in "The Ballad of Reading Gaol." And Heidegger takes Nietzsche to task for such moments of weakness as he reveals in his unpublished notes, rightly wondering, as we saw above, whether the will to stamp becoming with the character of being does not conceal "a highly spiritualized spirit of revenge":

> We no sooner pose this question than the illusion arises that we are trying to discredit Nietzsche, to impute something as most proper to him which is precisely what he wants to overcome. It is as though we cherished the view that by such imputation we were refuting the thought of this thinker. The officious will to refute never even approaches a thinker's path. Refutation belongs among those petty intellectual entertainments which the public needs for its amusement…. What is there left for us to say, if not this: Zarathustra's doctrine does not bring redemption from revenge? We do say it. Yet we say it by no means as a misconceived refutation of Nietzsche's philosophy. We do not even utter it as an objection against Nietzsche's thinking. But we say it in order to turn our attention to the fact that—and the extent to which—Nietzsche's thought

> too is animated by the spirit of prior reflection…. Thus something in Nietzsche's thinking comes to the fore which this thinking itself was no longer able to think. Such remaining behind what it has thought designates the creativity of a thinking. (*Nietzsche* 2:228 – 229)

Wolfgang Müller-Lauter takes issue with Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche in general, and here in particular he insists that Heidegger is unfair to Nietzsche. In an endnote to his essay "The Spirit of Revenge and the Eternal Recurrence," he protests as follows:

> I can refer only in passing to the fact that Heidegger cites a draft of Nietzsche's…as evidence that the latter conclusively succumbed to the spirit of revenge. As Heidegger quotes him, Nietzsche finds in himself 'a kind of sublime malice and ultimate wantonness of revenge—for there is *revenge* in it, revenge on life itself, when one who suffers deeply *takes life under his protection'*….If we regard Nietzsche's portrayal of types of *décadent* (among whom as at once *décadent* and 'healthy man' he classes himself), we can only be surprised to see that Heidegger draws from the sentence he quotes the conclusion: 'Zarathustra's teaching does not bring redemption from revenge'…. What is also astonishing about this conclusion of Heidegger's is that he makes no distinction between Nietzsche's description of the state of his existence at this time or that…and the 'ideal' demands of Nietzsche's 'fictional' character Zarathustra. (150 – 51n10).

But perhaps in this instance Müller-Lauter is not being completely fair either. Heidegger cites the draft in question not so much to show that Nietzsche himself "conclusively succumbed" to vengefulness, as to show that in many, if not all respects, Nietzsche was alert to the limitations of his thought, and had already touched upon the

criticisms of it that Heidegger develops. He introduces the draft by pointing out that "Nietzsche himself long ago anticipated the answer to our question." The fact that "something in Nietzsche's thinking comes to the fore which this thinking itself was no longer able to think," means of course that this anticipation was only partial, but this is because the richness of his thinking was such that "it points in an exceptional way to things unthought, cogently and confusedly at once" (*Nietzsche* 2: 229 – 230).[67]

Bernd Magnus—rightly, I think—professes a "high opinion of Müller-Lauter's work" (*Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* 215n26), though his own position on Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche seems to me to be more evenhanded than Müller-Lauter's. Although Magnus says he finds Heidegger's reading "uncongenial in broad strokes as well as in detail," he admits that it has "exerted considerable influence on [his] understanding of Nietzsche" (*Imperative* xix), and, differences of opinion

[67] A careful reading of Heidegger's essay "Who is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?" reveals a lot about his often maligned hermeneutic methods and his judicious insistence on the difficulty of putting distance between oneself and one's tradition. Consider again the final two sentences from the passage quoted above. ("Thus something in Nietzsche's thinking comes to the fore which this thinking itself was no longer able to think. Such remaining behind what it has thought designates the creativity of a thinking.") They represent a wonderful counterweight to Searle's admittedly useful maxim that "if you can't say it clearly you don't understand it yourself" (Searle x). Poets—and poetizing philosophers such as Nietzsche or Heidegger—risk losing control of their material in a way that writers and theorists who are less daring—or less reckless if one insists—do not, and so leave themselves open to the charge of peddling nonsense. But while clarity is a cardinal intellectual virtue, it is clearly not the only admirable quality in a thinker, and it may well on occasion be incompatible with others like imagination and suggestiveness, and even the desire to reach the right audience: "One does not only wish to be understood when one writes; one wishes just as surely *not* to be understood. It is not by any means necessarily an objection to a book when anyone finds it impossible to understand: perhaps that was part of the author's intention—he did not want to be understood by just 'anybody,'" writes Nietzsche (GS 381). Even Searle, working in a tradition that is very different from the one to which Nietzsche and Heidegger belong, suffers from a comparable anxiety, and notes that "anyone who attempts to write clearly runs the risk of being 'understood' too quickly, and the quickest form of such understanding is to pigeonhole the author with a whole lot of other authors that the reader is already familiar with" (*Intentionality* x). At any rate, whatever one's opinion of Heidegger's style, and the tenability of his interpretation of Nietzsche, one could never accuse him of ignoring Zarathustra's adage that "One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil" (Z I 22 3).

notwithstanding, this influence is plain in his interpretation of recurrence. Magnus sees recurrence not as the expression of an unconscious spirit of revenge against time, but rather as "a self-conscious ontological allegory" in the form of "an eternalistic countermyth which deifies what is transient" and "exemplifies the attitude of *Übermenschen*" (xvi). On Magnus's view, "Nietzsche remained convinced that human beings could only rededicate themselves to the earth if traditional eternalistic predicates are attached to it" (191). "Nietzsche," he writes, "was persuaded that Platonism and Christianity had so thoroughly disfigured Western consciousness that being weaned from them, without an eternalistic countermyth, would result in the triumph of shallowness; the tepid cheerfulness which slumbers while God dies" (192).[68]

Magnus acknowledges the force of Heidegger's charge in conceding that "Nietzsche's attempted redemption of the transient phenomenal realm contains that same passionate longing for unity, coherence, the unconditioned, which had informed the most intense expressions of previous philosophy and religion." But he insists that the way that Nietzsche "transfigures the object of adoration" is new. Magnus does not put it quite like this, but one could perhaps try to defend Nietzsche in his own terms by arguing that unlike his predecessors, he postulates his metaphysics from love of this world, not hatred of it:[69] "A world without eternity, Nietzsche must have thought, was unfit for human

[68] Magnus has revised his views about recurrence since the writing of *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative,* and no longer sees recurrence as an eternalistic countermyth or a "test of affirmation," but rather as a demand that if we are to be honest with ourselves, we must recognize that the "test" it sets us is one we cannot pass, "that our highest aspirations and yearnings turn against themselves in spite of themselves in the endless carnival of the ascetic ideal" ("Deconstruction Site: The 'Problem of Style in Nietzsche's Philosophy" 240).

[69] See GS 370 and NCW "We Antipodes"

habitation: but eternity 'beyond' or 'behind' the transitory was worse still" (*Imperative* 191 – 192). According to Magnus, it is because Nietzsche believes that humans are "kronophobes, despisers of time" (189) that he embraces a form of eternalism:

> Traditional metaphysics expresses the human need to arrest becoming, the need to make transience abide. The flux cannot be endured without transfiguration. Time, temporality, must be overcome. I have called this aversion to time and temporality, this aversion to transience, *kronophobia*. Traditional metaphysics expresses kronophobia….I insist that we are kronophobes, that we have a phobia against time, because that is what I take Nietzsche's constant claims to come to: the claim that we seek permanence where in fact there is none; the claim that we seek an order in everything; the claim that we need coherence, purpose, unity, meaning; the claim that without permanence, order, coherence, unity, purpose, meaning, we have only nihilism. (*Imperative* 194 – 195).

If Magnus is right, then Müller-Lauter perhaps goes too far in concluding that "it is beyond question that Nietzsche did not in the end fall captive to the spirit of revenge which he had opposed in *Zarathustra* as Heidegger thinks he did." Müller-Lauter correctly notes that "Nietzsche resisted on principle any attempt definitively to tie him down to anything he had said: for in his view every philosophy is a 'foreground philosophy' which *conceals* an (other) philosophy," but from this it follows that little, if anything, about Nietzsche is "beyond question" (149). However, if one considers that Müller-Lauter's claim is about what Nietzsche did *not* do "in the end," then perhaps his conclusion is warranted. Nietzsche's suggestion that no philosopher "ever expressed his real and ultimate opinions in books" and that one writes books "precisely to conceal what

one harbors" might seem to support Heidegger's reliance on the *Nachlass* to construct his somewhat totalizing interpretation, but if one continues reading this passage by Nietzsche, this seeming support disappears. One ought, he says, to "doubt whether a philosopher could *possibly* have 'ultimate and real' opinions, whether behind every one of his caves there is not, must not be, another deeper cave" (BGE 289). There is *nothing* that Nietzsche thinks of which one can safely say that it is what he thought "in the end."

Perhaps, "in the end," the *simplest* thing to say is that at times, as do we all, Nietzsche does suffer from ill will against time. "In this respect," says Magnus, echoing Heidegger, "Nietzsche stands squarely in the tradition he opposed, namely, that he, too, is an eternalist" (*Imperative* 194), although ill will against time is less an aspect of a tradition that can be embraced or resisted than it is constitutive of the human condition. "*Even in ourselves*," Zarathustra confesses, "the old idol priest still lives" (3.12.6), but aversion to change, which is at bottom fear of loss, is by no means exclusive to philosophers or priests. Speaking in a philosophical register, one could say that vulnerable individuals in a world of flux inevitably experience ontological insecurity: Magnus calls the search for permanence where in fact there is none "kronophobia"; existentialists call it angst; Buddhists, *duḥkha*. But in plain English it is just this: we do not like it when we ourselves and those we care about grow old, get sick, and die. Thus Yeats writes in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen":

> But is there any comfort to be found?
> Man is in love and loves what vanishes,

What more is there to say? (Yeats 211)

Of all the world's religions it is perhaps Buddhism—with its explicit focus on suffering and impermanence—that represents the most direct attempt to come up with an answer to Yeats's arresting questions. But if Buddhism's affirmative answer to Yeats's first question unites it with the other world religions, its answer to his second question—or at least Zen Buddhism's answer—sets it apart. What more is there to say? —Very little, almost nothing….One regrets the fact that time is always passing, and that things are always falling apart. But there is no need to make a fuss about it. This is a perfectly natural way to feel. "[I]f you are cursed," Zarathustra advises his disciples, "I do not like it that you want to bless. Rather join a little in the cursing" (1.19). A Buddhist might say that although all of us suffer somewhat from ill will against time, we need not suffer from ill will against this ill will.

Dōgen begins the *"Genjō Kōan"* with some abstruse theorizing on the nature of birth and death from the perspectives of practice and enlightenment, and the overcoming of the distinction between these perspectives in the "Buddha Way [which] is originally beyond any fullness and lack." And then he suddenly transitions to an idiom that is utterly down to earth: "Yet for all that, flowers fall amid our regret and yearning, and hated weeds grow apace" (*Shōbōgenzō* 40). In his commentary on the *"Genjō Kōan,"* Hakuun Yasutani cautions against a mistaken allegorical construal of this line:

> Simply, flowers fall amid our longing and weeds spring up amid our antipathy! It's just the way it reads. The style of Dōgen Zenji's language is very elevated, so if one's dharma eye is not clear one can't easily grasp what he is saying. If as a result of that you entertain your own personal deluded views, saying things like the flower is a metaphor for enlightenment and the weeds are a metaphor for delusion, it brings you around to the absurd place of saying, "You shouldn't seek after the flower of enlightenment or dislike the weeds of delusion," and it has the negative effect of leading you into advocating an it-doesn't-matter Zen with no practice and no enlightenment. (19)

Yasutani's criticism of what he takes to be a kind of passive nihilism masquerading as equanimity—"an it-doesn't-matter Zen"—invites comparison with Nietzsche's implicit criticism of a similar pose in *Zarathustra.* Two kings—members of a motley crowd of "higher men" that make their way to Zarathustra's cave—drive with them a laden ass, who repeatedly, and "with evil intent" comments "Yea-Yuh" on Zarathustra's speeches (4.3.1; 4.12). In a bizarre episode strongly reminiscent of the story of Moses and the golden calf, Zarathustra, having slipped out into the open to talk to his animals, reenters his cave to find the higher men kneeling and adoring the ass, who "does not speak, except he always says Yea to the world he created" (4.17.2). The ass's indiscriminate praise of the world with his repeated "Yea-Yuh" is a vulgar parody of *amor fati,* as Kathleen Higgins brings out in her analysis of this character's significance:

> *Zarathustra's* ass is praised in the ass-festival litany as affirming everything with his "Yeah-Yuh." This is clearly a travesty of God's pronouncements on the goodness of creation in Genesis. Perhaps more strikingly in the context, however, it indicates the higher men's absorption of Zarathustra's doctrine

> without genuine spiritual comprehension, for they recite the expressions of life-affirmation that Zarathustra has advocated without indicating the vitality that would make these words meaningful. (*Nietzsche's Zarathustra* 218)

In Zen too, categorical pronouncements on the goodness of the phenomenal world are frequent, but are also subject to the kind of suspicion that Nietzsche brings to bear on glib formulas of affirmation. Alan Watts tells the story of a Zen master to whom the question was put: "The mountains and hills and the sky—are not all these the body of Buddha?" The master responded, "Yes, but it's a pity to say so" (*Philosophies of Asia* 66).

There are superficial similarities between the doctrine of eternal recurrence and various Hindu and Buddhist theories of reincarnation or rebirth. Belief in rebirth, however, commits one to the view that the same entity—or in Buddhism, a causally connected entity—is repeatedly reborn in different circumstances, while the doctrine of recurrence posits instead the repetition of an identical life. Versions of both of these ideas are found in the writings of the Presocratics. Pythagoras himself was apparently a believer in metempsychosis, while his followers, according to Eudemus of Rhodes, held that identical events are repeated periodically: "Everything will eventually return in the self-same numerical order, and I shall converse with you staff in hand, and you will sit as you are sitting now, and so it will be in everything else, and it is reasonable to assume that time too will be the same" (qtd. in Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* 60). And Heraclitus, the Stoics, and Plotinus, all put forward cyclical cosmologies that

resemble recurrence in some respects.[70] "The doctrine of 'eternal recurrence,' that is, of the unconditional and infinitely repeated circular course of all things—this doctrine *might* in the end have been taught already by Heraclitus," Nietzsche writes. "At least the Stoa has traces of it, and the Stoics inherited almost all of their principal notions from Heraclitus" (EH BT 3). But, broadly speaking, cyclical conceptions of time are atypical of Western philosophical thought.

Instead, cosmic history, on the Christian view, unfolds between a definite beginning and an equally definite endpoint: namely, God's creation of the world, and his judgment of humankind on the last day. Construing recurrence in terms of Nietzsche's opposition to otherworldly religiosity, Hollingdale and other scholars point out that it represents the antithesis of Christian eschatology by precluding the prospect of any kind of heaven or hell: "I come again," says Zarathustra, "*not* to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I come back eternally to this same, selfsame life, in what is greatest as in what is smallest" (3.13.2). To the extent that Nietzsche thinks of time as cyclical rather than linear, he sides with "the Orient" against "the Occident."[71] However, it is not with Indian Buddhist theories of rebirth, but rather with Zen immanentist views of the value of the present moment, that I shall attempt to draw meaningful parallels to recurrence in the final sections of the chapter.

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[70] See Magnus, *Nietzsche's Existential Imperative* 47 – 68.

[71] It is true, as one might expect, that there are differences between Asian and Western conceptions of time, and it is also true, as many scholars have remarked, that, by contrast with China and the West, there is little interest in historiography in ancient Indian culture. But one should not make the crude Orientalist mistake of constructing a simplistic image of a timeless East to serve as the other of Western dynamism. Nietzsche himself is guilty of this in his unilluminating scatted remarks about "dessicated Chinese stagnation" (EH 4 4). (See also GS 24.) On this issue, see Said's, *Orientalism*, and Perrett's, "History, Time, and Knowledge in Ancient India."

10. Religious Approaches to Impermanence: the Importance of the Present Moment

I have argued above that throughout his career Nietzsche makes various attempts to stamp what he calls the "image of eternity" on experience (NR 240), none of which is completely successful. In *The Birth of Tragedy* he suggests that the world of becoming approximates the world of being when myths are reenacted that provide the participants with the metaphysical comfort that there is an unchanging real world behind the changing apparent one, but when, in breaking from Wagnerian romanticism, he rejects the Parmenidean-Platonic tradition of metaphysics, and shifts his allegiance from myth to science, this strategy is no longer open to him, and his search for a new solution to the problem of impermanence eventuates in the cosmological version of eternal recurrence, in which "the character of being" is "[imposed] upon becoming" (WP 617) by means of a cyclical cosmology. Yet the cosmological version too turns out to be deficient for a number of reasons. Nietzsche's stabs at constructing a proof in his notes are unconvincing, and he elected—rightly in my view—not to publish them. He did, however, choose to publish several passages in which the *life-world* of becoming approximates a life-world of being: neither metaphysically, nor cosmologically, but rather phenomenologically, in the experience of a "felt eternity" immanent in a moment of time. It is this "phenomenological solution" to the problem of impermanence that I claim closely resembles Zen Buddhist practice, and which I now wish to explore.

Exactly halfway through the fourth book of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*—a book which some commentators regard as detracting from the integrity of the work as a whole—there is a fascinating section titled "At Noon" that Kaufmann somewhat condescendingly calls a "charming intermezzo," but which in my view is much more significant than that; its placing as the tenth of twenty sections seems to me in some ways to mark it as the high point of Part IV, rather than as a mere interlude. Stambaugh points out that the phrase "noon and eternity" crops up repeatedly in the *Nachlass.* "There is a sense in which noon is not really a time of day at all," she writes, "but rather out of time, timelessness, eternity. Timelessness is precisely what Zarathustra experiences in the section 'At Noon'" (*The Other Nietzsche* 143 – 4). Zarathustra lies down to rest under a crooked old tree encircled by a grapevine, and enters into an altered state of consciousness: we are told that he falls asleep with open eyes. And in this altered state he has what seems to be a mystical experience:

> Still! Still! Did not the world become perfect just now? What is happening to me?... O happiness! O happiness! Would you sing, O my soul? You are lying in the grass. But this is the secret solemn hour when no shepherd plays his pipe. Refrain! Hot noon sleeps on the meadows. Do not sing! Still! The world is perfect. Do not sing, you winged one in the grass, O my soul—do not even whisper!... What happened to me? Listen! Did time perhaps fly away? Do I not fall? Did I not fall—listen!—into the well of eternity? What is happening to me? Still! I have been stung, alas—in the heart? In the heart! Oh break, break, heart, after such happiness, after such a sting. How? Did not the world become perfect just now? Round and ripe? Oh, the golden round ring—where may it fly? Shall I run after it? Quick! Still! (4.10)

Zarathustra's happiness—his apprehension of the world as perfect—appears to result from the sense of stillness that comes over him and makes him feel as if he has somehow fallen out of time and into eternity. He acknowledges having once thought himself clever for remarking ironically "how little is sufficient for happiness." "But it was a blasphemy: that I have learned now," he continues; "Clever fools speak better. Precisely the least, the softest, lightest, a lizard's rustling, a breath, a breeze, a moment's glance [*ein Augen-Blick*]—it is *little* that makes the *best* happiness. Still!" (4.10). It is unclear what Zarathustra is referring to in accusing himself of blasphemy. The closest he comes to specifying preconditions of happiness is when he mocks the "last men" who have their "little pleasure for the day" and their "little pleasure for the night" and take themselves to have "invented happiness" (Prologue 5). But at the beginning of *On the Utility and Liability of History for Life* Nietzsche himself spells out precisely what is needed for happiness:

> [I]n the case of the smallest and the greatest happiness, it is always just one thing alone that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget, or, expressed in a more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel ahistorically over the entire course of its duration. Anyone who cannot forget the past entirely and set himself down on the threshold of the moment, anyone who cannot stand, without dizziness or fear, on one single point like a victory goddess, will never know what happiness is; worse, he will never do anything that makes others happy. (1)

The experience of timelessness recounted above is Zarathustra's, but the vividness of the writing conveys a strong impression that Nietzsche himself was familiar with the state of consciousness described. It is characteristic of mystical states, according to William James, that they are taken by those who undergo them to be ineffable, but noetic: impossible to articulate in conceptual terms, yet disclosive nonetheless, not deceptive. All mystics, despite their many differences, insist on the priority of direct experience over theory construction, and Nietzsche does too. It is this orientation towards lived experience that Walter Kaufmann sees as explaining the fact that despite being "able to look back upon many a keen psychological insight as well as a comprehensive philosophy, [Nietzsche] should have preferred to think of himself as the teacher of eternal recurrence":

> Why did he value this dubious doctrine…so extravagantly? For it is plain that none of his other ideas meant so much to him. The answer must be sought in the fact that the eternal recurrence was to Nietzsche less an idea than an experience—the supreme experience of a life unusually rich in suffering, pain, and agony. (323)

"The moment is immortal in which I begot the recurrence," Nietzsche notes; "For the sake of this moment I will endure the recurrence" (NF-1882, 5[1]205). On Kaufmann's view, the "doctrine" of eternal recurrence is a misguided bid to communicate "the supreme exaltation of the moment." Recurrence, writes Kaufmann, represents "the most extreme repudiation of any deprecation of the moment, the finite,

and the individual—the antithesis of any faith in infinite progress, whether it be evolution, Faust's unbounded striving, or the endless improvement of the human soul in Kant's conception of immortality" (321). But Kaufmann claims that by couching his perception of the preciousness of the moment in a problematic theoretical framework, Nietzsche makes an unfortunate mistake:

> He turns a profound and valid insight into an exclusive 'doctrine'—and he might be criticized in the very words he used to pass judgment on Christianity: he 'transformed the symbolic into crudities' (WP 170). Yet his doctrine of the eternal recurrence is not an arbitrary antithesis to the Christian conception….He returns to the visions of Pythagoras, Heraclitus, the Stoics, and the Buddhists—seeing no other alternative to the conception of history as the development in time of the one God's will. (332)

It may be that Kaufmann is being a little unfair here, but Nietzsche does repeatedly complain of the difficulty of communicating his insights conceptually. That the linguistic means available to original thinkers really are inadequate to convey their deepest experiences is perhaps nowhere as strongly impressed on the reader as when Zarathustra sputters and swoons histrionically, but cannot manage to articulate his inner vision. And a strong sense of the limits of language and conceptualization typifies Nietzsche's thought—and his understanding of the thought of other philosophers—from the outset, as one sees in this passage from *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks:*

> The philosopher seeks to hear within himself the echoes of the world symphony and to re-project them in the form of concepts….What verse is for the poet, dialectical thinking is for the philosopher. He grasps for it in order to get hold of his own enchantment, in order to perpetuate it. And just as for the dramatist words and verse are but the stammering of an alien tongue, needed to tell what he has seen and lived, what he could utter directly only through music and gesture, just so every profound philosophic intuition expressed through dialectic and through scientific reflection is the only means for the philosopher to communicate what he has seen. But it is a sad means; basically a metaphoric and entirely unfaithful translation into a totally different sphere and speech. Thus Thales had seen the unity of all that is, but when he went to communicate it, he found himself talking about water! (44 – 45)

As is so often the case with Nietzsche, this text invites an autobiographical interpretation, and it is hard to resist reading it without thinking of Nietzsche's trying to get hold of *his own* original experience of the enchantment of a perfect moment by means of the various inadequate formulations of recurrence.

One concrete way to better appreciate the significance of the moment for Nietzsche—the fully-lived moment of immediate experience—is by a consideration of his attitude to the myth[72] of progress. His rejection of all attempts, whether religious or secular, to view history as teleological is "untimely" in several senses. It goes profoundly against the grain of the nineteenth century, the principles of the Enlightenment, and one of the central ideals of Western civilization itself. Here as elsewhere he is of course inspired by Schopenhauer, who vehemently opposed Hegel's view of history as the

[72] I use the word not in the popular sense of an untruth or common misconception, but in the anthropological sense of a metanarrative around which a culture coheres.

progress of the consciousness of freedom. Schopenhauer takes it that the fundamental nature of the metaphysical will does not change, and so he dismisses melioristic philosophies as superficial and anthropocentric:

> [A real philosophy of history] does not consist in our raising the temporal aims of men to eternal and absolute aims, and then constructing with ingenuity and imagination their progress to these through every intricacy and perplexity. It consists in the insight that history is untruthful not only in its arrangement, but also in its very nature, since, speaking of mere individuals and particular events, it always pretends to relate something different, whereas from beginning to end it constantly repeats only the same thing under a different name and in a different cloak. The true philosophy of history thus consists in the insight that, in spite of all these endless changes and their chaos and confusion, we yet always have before us only the same, identical, unchanging essence, acting in the same way today as it did yesterday and always. (*World* 2: 444)

Nietzsche too considers it a "swindle" to talk about the "world process" (PN 40), and like Schopenhauer he adopts a non-anthropocentric perspective on the world. "[L]et's just forget all this…about 'development'!" he writes in an early note. "It inevitably sounds ridiculous! The human being and the 'world process'! The earthly flea and the world spirit!" (UW 216; NF-1873, 29[53]). But of course, although Nietzsche accepts Schopenhauer's "suprahistorical" view that "the past and the present are one and the same" in all essential respects (HL 1), and thus that existence as a whole lacks an ultimate purpose, he rejects his mentor's corollary that life in such a pain-filled and purposeless world is not worth living, maintaining instead that it is up to each person to

impose meaning on his or her individual life through strength of will. "That my life has no aim is evident even from the accidental nature of its origin," he notes in 1873; "that *I can posit an aim for myself* is another matter" (PN 40).

The collective positing of such aims is the subject of the chapter "On the Thousand and One Goals" from *Zarathustra,* the site of the first published mention of the will to power. The "tablet of good [that] hangs over every people" as a record of their self-overcomings is "the voice of their will to power….Only man placed values in things to preserve himself—he alone created a meaning for things, a human meaning," Zarathustra claims. "A thousand goals have there been so far, for there have been a thousand peoples. Only the yoke for the thousand necks is still lacking: the one goal is lacking. Humanity still has no goal. But…if humanity still lacks a goal," he asks, "is humanity itself not still lacking too?" That the creation of meaning requires the positing of goals is suggested again in *The Antichrist.* "I have got lost; I am everything that has got lost," Nietzsche portrays modern humanity as sighing, and insists, in a phrase he first used in *Twilight of the Idols* (1.44) that the formula for happiness is "a Yes, a No, a straight line, a goal" (AC 1).

But for all his grandiloquent talk of overarching goals there is a contrasting theme that runs like an ostinato through Nietzsche's work; the idea, in Gary Shapiro's words quoted earlier, that "the totality of experience is sufficient unto itself" (139), and that there is no need to create meaning by positing such goals after all. "Reality shows us an enchanting wealth of types, the abundance of a lavish play and change of forms—and some wretched loafer of a moralist comments: 'No! Man ought to be different,'"

Nietzsche complains (TI 5.6): evidence of his misgivings about Zarathustra's despotic dream of "[throwing] a yoke over the thousand necks" (Z 1.15) of many peoples in order to impose upon humanity a single goal. Even Zarathustra does not *assert* that to lack a goal is to be lacking, but only *asks* if this is so; for it might equally be suggested that to *have* a goal is to lack something, namely that at which, as yet, one only aims. But however one goes on to spell out the details, what makes a life meaningful, what makes it worth living, must surely be some sense or other of fulfillment. And clearly, since one cannot be fulfilled by some future prospect, or—beyond the point at which the glow fades—by past accomplishments either, this is only to be had in the present. So the most meaningful life, for the Buddhist, is the one that is lived most fully in the present, rather than one spent dwelling on the past or waiting to live. The Buddhist would agree with Manu Bazzano's above quoted formulation in *Buddha is Dead:* "The plenitude of becoming is all there is. It is more than we will ever need, and it is manifesting at every instant" (41).

So, when confronted by the thought that existence lacks the kind of pre-established goal attributed to it by Christian eschatology, and that faith in historical progress will not do as a substitute, Nietzsche initially responds by suggesting that goals must be posited by creative individuals or "higher types" to defend against the threat of nihilism. But he is strongly attracted to the more radical view that there may be no need to posit such goals at all. "Can we remove the idea of a goal [*Zweckvorstellung*] from the process and then affirm the process in spite of this?" he asks. "This would be the case if something were attained at every moment within this process—and always the same"

(WP 55). Nietzsche realizes that the undertaking of intentional, or consciously goal-directed, action is not characteristic of the highest degree of affirmation possible. This is why he dubiously claims in *Ecce Homo* to know nothing from experience of "'[w]illing' something, 'striving' for something, envisaging a 'purpose,' a 'wish'" (Clever 9). The value of activity undertaken purely as a means to an end is only instrumental, and Nietzsche seeks a quasi-religious perspective from which every state of affairs can be viewed either as possessing intrinsic value, or as resisting or transcending valuation altogether: "Becoming must be explained without recourse to final intentions [*finalen Absichten*]; becoming must appear justified at every moment (or incapable of being evaluated; which amounts to the same thing); the present must absolutely not be justified by reference to a future, nor the past by reference to the present" (WP 708)[73].

The above-quoted note in which he states his willingness to endure recurrence for the sake of the moment in which he begot it reveals Nietzsche in a gloomier mood falling back on just such proscribed "inter-temporal" justification (NF-1882, 5[1]205), and Zarathustra is not above such stratagems either: "The now and the past on earth—alas, my friends, that is what *I* find most unendurable," he complains, "and I should not know how to live if I were not also a seer of that which must come" (2.20). Indeed, it is perfectly sensible in difficult times to reflect that all things considered, at least it was, or it will be, worth it. But the need so to reflect is symptomatic of an attitude to one's

[73] It does not amount to the same thing *logically*, but it does *forensically*. An unevaluable act, for example, might be unjustified for all we know. But what matters to Nietzsche is that we could not in fairness claim that it was from any perspective available to us. It is as if we must return a verdict of "not guilty" in the case of existence as a whole; what he elsewhere calls "the innocence of becoming" must be maintained (TI 6.7). Nietzsche's position here—as we saw in the chapter on suffering—invites comparison to the skeptical theistic response to the problem of evil.

present experience which, while psychologically healthy, is not as affirmative as the ideal attitude that Nietzsche seeks: "an "attitude of highest affirmation [involving] not mere acceptance," as Kathleen Higgins puts it, "but positive delight in whatever is before one" (*Nietzsche's Zarathustra* 184); a present-oriented outlook of ecstatic participation in the flow of events. And the idea that something is attained, that becoming appears justified "at every moment," is both consequential upon, and contributory to, the experience of such ecstatic moments. The belief that any given moment is propitious increases the intensity of one's awareness in that very moment, and the more moments of such intensity one lives through, the more grounds one has for the belief that every moment is propitious. What one could describe as the kairotic faith that "now's the time" is self-fulfilling in other words. The phrase "at every moment" is repeated mantra-like in Nietzsche's late works, embodying as it does the thought that the best-lived life is the one that is lived kairotically.

In the closing section of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche claims that life is made worthy of living "at every moment" by the "beauty of mere appearance." In the 1886 preface to the reissued edition, he puts some ironic distance between himself and his earlier "artists' metaphysics," which he acknowledges could be censured as "arbitrary, idle, fantastic," but he is not prepared completely to disavow his vision of an "eternally changing, eternally new" world as "at every moment the attained salvation of God [*in jedem Augenblicke die erreichte Erlösung Gottes*]" (5); his commitment to the underlying idea is too deep. "At every moment the meaning of becoming must be fulfilled, achieved, completed," he writes in a notebook the following year (NF-1887, 11[82]), and

the year after that in a remarkable passage in *The Antichrist*, he comes tantalizingly close to claiming that Jesus lived in such a way that every moment of his life was complete:

> I am against any attempt to introduce the fanatic into the Redeemer type….The "glad tidings" are precisely that there are no longer any opposites; the kingdom of heaven belongs to the *children;* the faith which finds expression here is not a faith attained through struggle—it is there, it has been there from the beginning….Such a faith is not angry, does not reproach, does not resist: it does not bring "the sword"….It does not prove itself either by miracle or by reward and promise, least of all "by scripture": *at every moment* [italics added] it is its own miracle, its own reward, its own proof, its own "kingdom of God." Nor does this faith formulate itself: it *lives*, it resists all formulas….Using the expression somewhat tolerantly, one could call Jesus a "free spirit"—he does not care for anything solid: the word kills, all that is solid, kills. The concept, the *experience* of "life" in the only way he knows it, resists any kind of formula, law, faith, dogma. (32)

Careful attention to Nietzsche's language reveals the degree to which he identifies with the portrait of Jesus he paints here. In what follows, I list a set of relevant excerpts. As with Jesus, it would be vain to seek "for a trait of fanaticism in [Nietzsche's] character," according to him (EH 2.10). Nietzsche's message too is that "there are no opposites" (HAH 1), that "*the faith in opposite values"* is a mistake (BGE 2). Like Jesus, he presents an idealized image of the child as exemplary. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* the child is "innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes'" (1.1), and a "man's maturity" in *Beyond Good and Evil* "consists in having found again the seriousness one had as a child, at play" (94). There is

"no trace of *struggle"* either in Nietzsche's own faith that "everything actually happens as it ought to happen" (WP 1004), and it too, he claims, has been there from the beginning: "But that is how I have always lived. I had no wishes" (EH Clever 9). Neither does Nietzsche want to accuse, "[he does not] even want to accuse those who accuse" (GS 276), and he is equally disdainful of proof. "[W]hat have I to do with refutations!" he exclaims (GM Preface 4), placing his trust "not merely [in] logical inference, but [in] the immediate certainty of vision" (BT 1), and insisting that "[a]n action demanded by the instinct of life is proved to be *right* by the pleasure that accompanies it" (AC 11). Finally, Nietzsche, like Nietzsche's Jesus, is a "free spirit" who has trouble translating his most personal experiences into words: "We no longer esteem ourselves sufficiently when we communicate ourselves," he writes. "Our true experiences are not at all garrulous. They could not communicate themselves even if they tried" (TI 9.26). For Nietzsche also only what no longer lives can properly be formulated: "A witticism," he wittily observes, "is an epigram on the death of a feeling" (AOM 202).

Needless to say, I have cherry picked quotations to support my claim that the image of Jesus that Nietzsche presents in *The Antichrist* is one with which he identifies closely; or better perhaps, that this image is a projection of gentler aspects of his psyche which he was frequently at pains to repress.[74] But to the objection that this kind of quote

[74] It is a feminist commonplace that men have tended to project unwanted features of their psychology onto women; the fear of female sexuality that is endemic to patriarchal religion is a case in point. Revealingly, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche rants that a "woman without piety would…seem utterly obnoxious and ridiculous to a profound and godless man" (239). It seems that Nietzsche here finds desirable in women that which he has repressed in himself.

mining is illegitimate, I can only respond that what I am trying to do here is to draw attention to a strong undercurrent of Nietzsche's thinking, without wishing to insist that it represents the main thrust of his thought. "[T]he other Nietzsche: Nietzsche the poetic mystic," as Joan Stambaugh calls the "relatively untouched" figure she explores in bringing out connections to Eastern philosophy "is not the whole of Nietzsche by any means; but it is there" (*The Other Nietzsche* 135). Whitman's blithe confession in *Song of Myself* that he contradicts himself since he is large and contains multitudes has become rather clichéd, but of nobody is it truer than it is of Nietzsche, one of whose decisive traits, by his own admission, was "the close proximity of the brightest and most calamitous forces" (EH BT 4).

As any careful reader of his work knows, Nietzsche warns again and again against the danger of misunderstanding him. He claims his purpose in writing *Ecce Homo* is to say *who he is*, so that he is not mistaken for someone else (Preface 1). "Have I been understood?" he asks repeatedly in its closing sections, before ending the book with the famous formula *"Dionysus versus the Crucified"* (4.7 – 9). It has always seemed to me that this is best read not as a definition of his position, but as a definition of *himself;* it is surely significant that in signing his last insane letters he alternates between the names "Dionysus" and "The Crucified." The "every moment" Jesus with whom I claim Nietzsche identifies in the above quoted passage is a psychological type that he tries to rescue from the "extensive distortion" of the Gospels (AC 31), in which he fears Jesus

most likely appears "mutilated or overloaded with alien features" (29).[75] And remarkably, this sympathetic character strikes Nietzsche as seeming like "a Buddha on soil that is not at all Indian" (31); a description that, although for very different reasons, could equally be applied to any of the Chan and Zen masters of China and Japan.

11. Nietzsche and Dōgen

One such figure, whose work has already been touched on above, was Dōgen, the founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan. Like Nietzsche, he was bereaved at an early age; watching the smoke rising from his mother's funeral pyre as a child of seven, he was overcome by a deep awareness of impermanence. Yet after he experienced satori, he joyfully embraced this impermanence. "The very impermanence of grasses, trees, bushes, and forests is the Buddha-nature," he writes; "the very impermanence of people, things, body,

[75] Nietzsche does allow for the possibility that his sympathetic portrait of Jesus may be inaccurate, since "as a type of decadence, the type [of the Redeemer, i.e. Jesus] *might* actually have been peculiarly manifold and contradictory," though he considers it unlikely for several reasons. "Meanwhile," he continues, "there is a gaping contradiction between the sermonizer on the mount, lake, and meadow, whose appearance seems like that of a Buddha on soil that is not at all Indian, and that fanatic of aggression, that mortal enemy of theologians and priests, whom Renan's malice has glorified as *le grand maître en ironie"* (AC 31). Ironically enough, even if we concentrate on this less attractive manifold character, the parallels to Nietzsche—and especially to the author of *The Antichrist*—are arresting. As a self-diagnosed decadent himself (EH "Why I Am So Wise" 1 – 2), he too was "peculiarly manifold and contradictory," and his spirited polemic against Christianity in *The Antichrist* repeatedly descends into fanatical aggression and enmity. After acknowledging his decadence in the opening section of *Ecce Homo* Nietzsche shifts in the first line of the second to this claim: "Apart from the fact that I am a decadent, I am also the opposite." Finally, by way of a captivating portrait of the "well-turned-out person," he arrives in the last line of the same section at this: "Well then, I am the *opposite* of a decadent, for I have just described *myself."* It is a brilliant sequence of moves on Nietzsche's part, but it is doubtful whether it fully succeeds. Insisting that one is *not* a decadent because as well as being a decadent one is also the opposite is like insisting that one is really whole since one is only partly divided against oneself.

mind is the Buddha-nature." For Dōgen, as for Nietzsche and Heraclitus, "being is an empty fiction" (TI 3.2):

> To learn, in speaking of essential nature, there is no flowing for water and no growth and perishing for trees, is to learn heresy. Śākyamuni Buddha said, "Such is form; such is essential nature." Accordingly, flowers opening, leaves falling in themselves are suchness of their essential nature. Nevertheless, fools think there can be no flower opening, no leaf falling, in the realm of true Reality. (qtd. in Abe 52)

Dōgen was born in Kyoto in 1200, fifteen years after the beginning of the Kamakura period of Japanese history. During the preceding Heian period, which lasted from 794 to 1185, Japan enjoyed an extended period of peace and prosperity, and the period is thought of to this day as the high point of classical Japanese culture. But the overthrow of the emperor and the establishment of the military shogunate by Miyamoto no Yoritomo ushered in a long era of social, political and economic unrest, as competing warlords vied for power. The belief took hold that the transmission of Buddhism had entered its third and final stage, the degenerate age of *mappō*, and that it was no longer possible for people to pursue the dharma by means of their own efforts. The rise of devotional forms of Japanese Buddhism, like the Nichiren and Pure Land schools, reflects the influence of this belief. According to Pure Land Buddhism, for example, although circumstances in this world were no longer conducive to enlightenment, the faithful invocation of the celestial Buddha Amitābha's name would ensure rebirth in the

Pure Land, a transcendent realm in which everything is favorable to enlightenment. Inhabitants of the Pure Land were all thought of as being certain to reach nirvana.

But Chan and Zen Buddhists have always been dismissive of the appeal of the Pure Land: "I notice that some monks and laymen always invoke the Buddha Amitābha and desire to be reborn in the West," a government official remarks to Huineng in the Platform Sutra; "I beg of you to explain whether one can be born there or not, and thus resolve my doubts." "Prefect, listen and I shall explain things for you," Huineng responds:

> At Śrāvastī the World-Honored One preached of the Western Land in order to convert people, and it is clearly stated in the *sūtra*, "[The Western Land] is not far." It was only for the sake of people of inferior capacity that the Buddha spoke of farness; to speak of nearness is only for those of superior attainments….The deluded person concentrates on Buddha and wishes to be born in the other land; the awakened person makes pure his own mind. Therefore the Buddha said: "In accordance with the purity of the mind the Buddha land is pure." (Yampolsky 156 – 7; brackets in original)

Nietzsche rejects the prevailing nineteenth century European belief in progress; Dōgen conversely rejects the prevailing thirteenth century Japanese belief in decline. Each thinker rejects the view that he does for the sake of the present moment, and each insists on the need to see the world as complete just as it is right now. One of Dōgen's

most forceful statements of this position is to be found in his *"Busshō,"* or "Buddha Nature"—an essay on the subject from his masterwork, the *Shōbōgenzō.* Given the critical importance of his remarks on this score, I quote him here at some length:

> The Buddha said, "If you wish to grasp the meaning of 'Buddha Nature', just look at the conditions associated with the moment. Then, when the right moment arrives, Buddha Nature will manifest before your very eyes." Now, the statement, "If you wish to grasp the meaning of 'Buddha Nature'" does not simply mean having knowledge of It. Rather, it is tantamount to saying, "If you want to put It into practice, if you want to experience It directly, if you want to 'see' It," or even "If you want to get the thought of It out of your mind." And this giving voice to It, putting It into practice, experiencing It directly, dropping off thoughts of whether one is accurate or inaccurate about It, and so forth, are conditions associated with the moment….
>
> As to the phrase 'when the right moment arrives', folks in both the past and the present have frequently held the view that this means one simply waits for some future time when Buddha Nature will manifest before one's eyes. They believe that while doing their training and practice in this way, the time will arrive when Buddha Nature will spontaneously manifest before their eyes. They say that until that time comes, It will not manifest even by visiting one's Master and inquiring into the Dharma or even by doing one's best to practice the Way. Looking at the Matter in this manner, they uselessly return to worldly ways, vainly waiting for It to fall down upon them from the heavens. Folks like this, I fear, are that type of non-Buddhist who believes that things just happen to happen, independent of any cause.
>
> The Buddha's statement, "If you wish to grasp the meaning of 'Buddha Nature,'" was His way of saying, "If you want to know the meaning of 'Buddha Nature' here and now." His statement, "Just look at the conditions associated with the moment," was His way of saying, "Just discern what the conditions at

this moment are." You need to realize that His saying "If you wish to know Buddha Nature" is synonymous with the conditions at the moment.

And as to His saying "When the right moment arrives," the moment has already arrived, so where is there room for doubt? Even if we should have doubts about whether it is the right moment, this is still Buddha Nature coming forth in us. You need to realize that the phrase "when the right moment arrives" means that we should not idle away any moment within a day. His saying "when it arrives" is as if He had said, "It has already come." When we get all involved with 'when the time comes', Buddha Nature does not come before us. Hence, since the time has already come, this is "Buddha Nature manifesting before our very eyes." In other words, the truth of It is self-evident. In sum, there has not yet been a time when the right moment has not come, nor is there a Buddha Nature which is not Buddha Nature manifesting before our very eyes right now. ("On Buddha Nature" 21: 248 – 49)

The essay in which the above paragraphs appear, as does much of the *Shōbōgenzō*, consists in large part of linked commentaries on Chinese Chan texts. As Carl Bielefeldt explains, Dōgen's "readings of these passages can be highly idiosyncratic and often depend on linguistic play with the grammar and syntax of his Chinese quotations" (Bielefeldt, *Busshō* intro.). The statement attributed to the Buddha with which the above quotation opens, for example, although it derives indirectly from the Buddha's words, is actually based on a remark by the Tang Dynasty Chan Master Baizhang Huaihai; and Dōgen's interpretation of the phrase "when the moment arrives" to mean "the moment has already arrived" depends on a vernacular construal of a variant source of Baizhang's remark. But it is not my purpose—and it is beyond my competence anyway—to criticize Dōgen as a hermeneut of classical Chinese; my purpose in touching

on these textual issues is simply to draw attention to the way that Dōgen's creative rereading of his sources here is informed, as is Nietzsche's idiosyncratic reading of the character of Jesus in the gospels, by an unequivocal rejection of any form of millenarianism, or the belief in some radically distinct future state of blessedness.

The basic insight of both Nietzsche and Dōgen is that there is something self-defeating about anticipatory spirituality; that if life is not to be found in the present, it will not be found anywhere else. "Since there is nothing but just this moment, the time-being is all the time there is," according to Dōgen. "Each moment is all being, is the entire world. Reflect now whether any being or any world is left out of the present moment" ("The Time Being" 156). In Zen, one discovers one's life in this very moment by the practice of zazen, or seated meditation, simply by attending calmly and closely to one's ongoing experience of the present. This amounts to an implicit affirmation of the process of living without any thought of some ultimate goal toward which it tends. In certain varieties of Buddhism, meditation is understood as a *means* to enlightenment, but in Zen, it is seen rather as a *manifestation* of enlightenment. Zen, writes Bernard Phillips in his introduction to an anthology of D.T. Suzuki's work, should not be thought of "as a specific technique for achieving a particular goal":

> Reality, or the life of truth, is not a goal to be reached by a certain process. Unless the process be real, how shall it lead to reality as a goal? The real life, which is the religious life, emerges only where the goal is present in the process and where consummation is achieved at every moment." (xviii)

One does not perform zazen to *become* enlightened; one performs zazen because one *is* enlightened. The view that practice and enlightenment are not distinct is the central tenet of Dōgen's thought. "Zazen is not 'step-by-step meditation,'" he maintains. "Rather it is simply the easy and pleasant practice of a Buddha, the realization of the Buddha's Wisdom. The truth appears, there being no delusion" ("Universal Recommendation" 142). "In Dōgen's realization," writes Masao Abe in *Zen and Western Thought*, "it is not that the fullness of time occurs at a particular time in history but that any moment of history is the fullness of time because for him at every moment time fully manifests itself" (64). One could substitute Nietzsche's name for Dōgen's here *salva veritate*; this is precisely his view as well, or at the very least, the view to which he aspired. "At every moment," to quote that note of his again, "the meaning of becoming must be fulfilled, achieved, completed" (NF-1887, 11[82]).

There are two related criticisms that might be made of my thesis that Nietzsche and Dōgen are in basic agreement in their attitudes to the present moment. First, it might be objected that their philosophies—at least as I have presented them—are superficial in this respect. And second, if this is so, then whatever similarities do exist between their positions thus described will inevitably be superficial too. I will attempt to respond to these criticisms before bringing the present chapter to a close

Consider the objection that all this "presentocentric" philosophizing by Nietzsche and Dōgen to the effect that "there has not yet been a time when the right moment has not come" does not amount to much more in the end than to the platitude that one ought to live for the present. It is hard to know just what to say to this charge. One could point

out that it would be a mistake to assimilate the *Lebensphilosophie* of either Nietzsche or Dōgen to Horace's hedonistic advice to seize the day. Neither thinker is advocating the single-minded pursuit of passing physical pleasures as a recipe for living, though they certainly do not wish to prohibit sensuous enjoyment as such. Or one could protest more generally that there is scarcely any view about how to live that does not sound platitudinous in condensed form. ("So basically Kant is just saying that we ought not to use people, and Mill is just saying we ought to do as much good as we can?") Bernd Magnus touches on this issue as he calls attention to a difficulty that some of Nietzsche's precepts cause for his readers in an endnote to "The Deification of the Commonplace":

> "Consecrate your passions," "sublimate your impulses," "give style to your character" are impotent maxims in that it is hard to know how and where to begin. Which passions am I to consecrate, and how? And what does that mean? ...Some people regard such directives as powerful reminders (e.g. "know yourself"), even though what they enjoin is unclear. For others…such maxims are banal as well. This is an honest difference among commentators about what does and does not matter, what is and what is not interesting and important. I know of nothing that would count as settling this difference of opinion. (180n43).

Neither do I, at least nothing that could put in the form of a deductively valid argument. If these differences of opinion are to be settled at all, they will most likely be settled by informal methods that are more typical of literary critics than philosophers, and not such as to command universal assent. The burden falls on readers whom such adages strike as forceful to articulate their own response to them in such a way that their force is

made manifest to others, but this burden can only be discharged in the presence of a receptive interlocutor. And the presence of the necessary receptivity would seem to depend on preparatory immersion in a shared form of life, as the following anecdote by William James suggests:

> "I've heard that said all my life," we exclaim, "but I never realized its full meaning until now." "When a fellow-monk," said Luther, "one day repeated the words of the Creed: 'I believe in the forgiveness of sins,' I saw the Scripture in an entirely new light; and straightway I felt as if I were born anew. It was as if I had found the door of paradise thrown wide open." (344 – 45; *The Varieties of Religious Experience* "Mysticism")

James characterizes "that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over one" as a rudimentary kind of mystical experience, and indeed the literature of Zen, despite the official position that in it there is no reliance on words or letters, is full of exchanges in which the utterance of some seeming banality or other by the master elicits an experience of satori in the student. But "[w]e do not accept the mode of the seer in academic circles," as Arne Naess observes. The characteristic way in which philosophical texts are read is not conducive to epiphanies. And yet, Naess continues, "if you hear a phrase like 'all life is fundamentally one,' you must be open to *tasting* this, before asking immediately, 'what does this mean?'" (105). On a related note, Robert Solomon remarks that an exhortation like "'Be yourself' (or 'become who you are') is, in the right circumstances and for the right readers, not an annoying vacuity but a profound, even life-changing bit of advice"

("Nietzsche *ad hominem*" 219n23), and it is also worth remembering Nietzsche's frequent and unironic employment of the refrain of Jesus, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear." In short, in cases of the kind in question, perhaps the only criterion of profundity is pragmatic: if a piece of advice changes the lives of a sufficient number of people, then that advice is clearly life-changing. And this seems true of the advice to live fully in the present, when taken in the context of a body of work like Nietzsche's or Dōgen's.

D.T. Suzuki relates a pertinent Chan anecdote on this score, in which a provincial governor visits an eccentric master known as Bird's Nest owing to his habit of practicing zazen in a tree and asks: "What is the teaching of Buddhism?" The master responds by reciting stanza 183 of the *Dhammapada:*

> Not to commit evils,
> But to practice all good,
> And to keep the heart pure—
> This is the teaching of the Buddhas.

When the governor protests that a three year old child knows that, the master retorts, "Any child three years old may know it, but even an old man of eighty years finds it difficult to practice" (qtd. in Kapleau, *Three Pillars* 405). This appeal to the importance of practice is critical. Magnus complains, with some justification, that when confronted with certain of Nietzsche's maxims, "one scarcely knows how or where to begin" ("Deification" 180n43). But if one were to ask of Dōgen how exactly to go about

living in the present, the questioner would be directly referred to the detailed instructions set out in one of his meditation manuals: "Now, in doing zazen it is desirable to have a quiet room….Usually a thick square mat is put on the floor where you sit and a round cushion on top of that. You may sit in either the full or half lotus position….With your eyes kept continuously open, breathe quietly through your nostrils…" ("Universal Recommendation" 142). The difficulty of putting such simple directions into practice can be attested to by any meditator.

Nietzsche, of course, did not engage in daily zazen, but a number of passages in his work indicate that his stress on the importance of attending closely to present experience was not merely theoretical. His gentle mockery of the practice of meditation in the opening paragraphs of *The Case of Wagner* only serves to underline the suggestive parallels between aesthetic experience and meditative states:

> Yesterday I heard—would you believe it?—Bizet's masterpiece for the twentieth time. Again I stayed there with tender devotion; again I did not run away. This triumph over my impatience surprises me. How such a work makes one perfect! One becomes a "masterpiece" oneself. Really, every time I heard *Carmen* I seemed to myself more of a philosopher, a better philosopher, than I generally consider myself: so patient do I become, so happy, so Indian, so settled.—To sit five hours: the first stage of holiness! (1)

And there are other passages scattered throughout his work which seems relevant to the topic of meditation. Nietzsche's criticism of moderns in *Schopenhauer as Educator* for the way that they avoid solitude and silence would resonate with any

contemplative: "Ghostly things are occurring around us, every moment of life wants to tell us something, but we do not want to hear this ghostly voice," he writes. "When we are quiet and alone we are afraid that something will be whispered into our ear, and hence we despise quiet and drug ourselves with sociability" (5). (Notice again how it is "every moment of life" that is potentially disclosive.) His portrayal of the philosopher in *The Birth of Tragedy* as "[observing] the reality of existence carefully and cheerfully [*genau und gern*]" could equally be a depiction of the Buddhist engaged in mindfulness practice (BT 1). And apart from the style and the Biblical reference, his condemnation of intellectual distractedness in the *Genealogy* could have come straight from the mouth of a Zen master:

> We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should ever *find* ourselves? It has rightly been said: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"; *our* treasure is where the beehives of our knowledge are….Whatever else there is in life, so-called "experiences"—which of us has sufficient earnestness for them? Or sufficient time? Present experience has, I am afraid, always found us "absent-minded": we cannot give our hearts to it—not even our ears! Rather, as one divinely preoccupied and immersed in himself into whose ear the bell has just boomed with all its strength the twelve beats of noon suddenly starts up and asks himself: "what really was that which just struck?" so we sometimes rub our ears *afterward* and ask, utterly surprised and disconcerted, "what really was that which we have just experienced?" and moreover: "who *are* we really?" and, afterward, as aforesaid, count the twelve trembling bell-strokes of our experience, our life, our *being*—and alas! miscount them. (Preface 1)

In the sermon on the mount, Jesus advises against laying up "treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal" and urges the laying up of "treasures in heaven" instead (Matt. 6.19 – 20). By means of the carefully chosen allusion to Matthew, Nietzsche suggests a parallel between his objection to bookishness and his objection to Christianity: to the extent that both are forms of escapism, they interfere with self-awareness and impoverish life. Present experience, he implies, is where our real treasure is, and thus where our hearts should be too: "For as long as one is experiencing something one must give oneself up to the experience and close one's eyes: that is to say, not be an observer [*Beobachter*] of it while still *in the midst* of it" (WS 297). By "[closing] one's eyes" during an experience, Nietzsche suggests ironically, one attends more closely to the experience as it unfolds, since in order to "'observe' [*betrachtet*] one's subject," one must "set oneself at a distance" from it (HAH vol. 2 Preface 1). Observation "[disturbs] the absorption of…experience: instead of a piece of wisdom one [acquires] indigestion," he warns (WS 297). Of course, Nietzsche was himself a deeply reflective person, and a master of self-observation, but he acknowledges here that constant reflection pathologically separates one from the prereflective experience which is the stuff of life itself. In zazen one enters the flow of experience more fully by allowing the running commentary that ordinarily supplements it to fall silent: "Once you have adjusted your posture, take a deep breath, inhale and exhale, rock your body right and left and settle into a steady, immobile sitting position," counsels Dōgen; "Think of not thinking. How do you think of not thinking? Without thinking. This in itself is the essential art of zazen" (qtd. in Kasulis *Zen Action* 71).

12. Conclusion

I have tried in the last few pages to dispel the worry that there may be something platitudinous about the way that Nietzsche and Dōgen insist on the importance of living in the present. In so doing I have also responded implicitly to the second criticism listed above: namely the claim that such parallels as there are between their views are merely verbal or otherwise insignificant. To rebut this criticism explicitly, it should be enough to emphasize again that each thinker consciously frames his position as a response to an otherworldly religious view that challenges the ability of the individual to live meaningfully by his or her own efforts, and postpones the supreme good of human existence until after death. Huston Smith's astute diagnosis of a major reason for the current popularity of Zen in the West lends further support to my claim that the parallels are neither fortuitous nor inessential:

> We understand the specific attraction of [Zen] when we realize the extent to which the contemporary West is animated by "prophetic faith," the sense of the holiness of the *ought*, the pull of the way things could be and should be but as yet are not. Such faith has obvious virtues, but unless it is balanced by a companion sense of the holiness of the *is*, it becomes top-heavy. If one's eyes are always on tomorrows, todays slip by unperceived. To a West which in its concern to refashion heaven and earth is in danger of letting the presentness of life—the only life we really have—slip through its fingers, Zen comes as a reminder that if we do not learn to perceive the mystery and beauty of our *present* life, our *present* hour, we shall not perceive the worth of *any* life, of *any* hour. (xiii)

To sum up, my position is that the different versions of Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence may be understood as attempts on his part to deal with the existential problem of impermanence that he faced on abandoning the traditional religious beliefs that he was raised with. The logical culmination of his objection to depriving this life of value by placing it in some beyond instead is the view that one ought not to deprive this present moment of value by living retrospectively or prospectively. On the contrary, one ought to live in such a way that one experiences one's life as complete at every moment, and one does this by living autotelically: by engaging in each and every activity not merely as a means to some further end, but always also for its own sake. Of course, given certain basic facts about the human condition, this is something that one can only aspire to, but a person's life will be meaningful insofar as it approaches this ideal. To the extent that something is attained at every moment (WP 55), the phenomenal world takes on the character of perfection.

"'The world is perfect'—thus says the instinct of the most spiritual, the Yes-saying instinct; 'imperfection, whatever is beneath us…still belongs to this perfection,'" Nietzsche writes in *The Antichrist* (57). The Mahāyāna idea of the nonduality of nirvana and saṃsāra leads those who hold it to make very similar pronouncements. "The whole universe is one bright pearl," Dōgen writes; "Even if there is doubt and anxiety, they are the bright pearl. There is not a single activity or thought that is not the bright pearl" (qtd. in Foster and Shoemaker 216 – 17). Nietzsche's view that the embrace of eternal recurrence constitutes the highest possible affirmation can be seen as analogous to the Mahāyāna view that there is no nirvana to be found outside of saṃsāra. *"The*

commonplace is deified," as Bernd Magnus puts it, *"in the alembic of eternal recurrence"* ("Deification" 177n1).

It is owing to the influence of otherworldly philosophies and religions, according to Nietzsche, that "one learned to despise 'little' things, which means the basic concerns of life itself" (EH 2.10). He thinks that we had better learn to esteem them again: "There is a need for those who will sanctify all activities [*alle Verrichtungen heiligen*], not only eating and drinking—and not merely in remembrance of them and to become one with them, but this world must be transfigured ever anew and in new ways," he notes (WP 1044). The Tang Dynasty Chan devotee Layman Pang sounds like exactly the kind of person Nietzsche has in mind here. When asked about his daily activities, he famously responded that they were not unusual; it was just that he was naturally in harmony with them:

> [My] supernatural power and marvelous activity—
> Drawing water and carrying firewood. (qtd. in *Addiss* et al. 54; brackets in original)

This sense of the holiness of ordinary life is one of the strongest themes in Zen to this day. The well known Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh makes no distinction between the sacred and the profane, and says that when washing the dishes one should do so with the quality of attention that one would bring to bathing a baby Buddha:

> Each thought, each action in the sunlight of awareness becomes sacred. In this light, no boundary exists between the sacred and the profane. It may take a bit

> longer to wash the dishes, but we can live fully, happily, in every moment. Washing the dishes is at the same time a means and an end—that is, not only do we do the dishes in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes and to live fully in each moment while washing them. (*Present Moment* 51)

As do Nietzsche's animals who "[disappear] entirely into the present, like a number that leaves no remainder" (HL 1), the Zen adept disappears entirely into whatever activity she is engaged in, and experiences as she does so a kind of epiphany of the everyday like the peak experiences that Nietzsche writes of from time to time. David Owen points out that there is a paradoxical quality to these moments of wonder and joy in that "a sense of the dissolution of subjectivity in an experience of 'oneness' and a sense of the presence of subjectivity in recognizing and watching its own dissolution" seem simultaneously to co-exist. "We might express this paradox," Owen writes, "by saying that I experience the dissolution of subjectivity as an *actor* but that I experience the presence of subjectivity as a *spectator,"* associating wonder with the sense of being a spectator, and joy with the transformation of one's sense of agency (107 – 8). Such states of consciousness, in which the felt distinction between what one does and what happens by itself disappears, play an important role in Nietzsche's thought. In the final chapter of the dissertation I examine Nietzsche's theory of action, and some Zen parallels, with a view to drawing out some consequences of the dissolution of subjective agency in such states for our traditional self-conception. Before exploring the *phenomenology* of action in Zen though, I want in the next chapter to consider some aspects of the Buddhist theory

of karma, or in other words, the *consequences* of action, with a view to drawing out some points of contact between a karmic attitude to life and Nietzsche's psychological and ontological views.

Chapter 5

Karma and *Amor Fati*

1. Introduction

The basic meaning of the Sanskrit word "karma" is simply "action" or "doing." In the *Vedas*, it came to mean "ritual action"; hence it is probably related to the Latin *caerimonia*, from which the English *ceremony* derives. The eventual result of one's action, to which the word karma is often applied in contemporary popular usage, is more correctly called *phala*, or literally "fruit." According to the doctrine of karma, a person is in a sense *accountable* for their conduct. All intentional actions have repercussions which redound to the agent's *credit or discredit*. Right actions bring about good consequences for the agent, and wrong actions, conversely, bring about bad ones: "By oneself is wrong done, / By oneself is one defiled. / By oneself wrong is not done, / By oneself, surely, is one cleansed. / One cannot purify another; Purity and impurity are in oneself [alone]" reads the *Dhammapada* (Carter and Palihawadana 31; 165; brackets in orig.).

The Buddhist doctrine of karma differs in several respects from the Christian understanding of divine retribution. Since Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, there is no supreme being who judges our actions and metes out rewards and punishments accordingly. Rather, consequences follow from conduct in accordance with an impersonal law of cause and effect, which can be seen as natural, not transcendental.

This is often explained by saying that one is not punished *for* one's sins, but *by* them. Furthermore, since there is no God on the Buddhist worldview to whom one could appeal for forgiveness, the consequences of one's actions are inescapable. In short, one cannot "get away" with anything.

Karl Potter argues that there is "no such thing as 'the' theory or law of karma… [since] the number of karma theories is legion" ("Karma Theories" 231 – 2). But he has identified a common core that he calls the classical karma theory of India. The basic theory—as opposed to certain philosophical elaborations of it—is not necessarily deterministic: the minutest details of the situation in which one finds oneself may not have been fixed in advance by the actions one took in one's previous lives, but only "certain fundamental features of one's present life—vis., the genus, species, and class into which one has been born, the length of life one is (likely) to have, and the type of affective experiences one is having" (Potter "Critical Response" 109). Presumably whether one is optimistic or pessimistic by nature, for instance, is among the factors that depend on one's karma. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and others compare one's karmically generated circumstances to the hand that one is dealt in a card game. One cannot do anything about the cards one receives, but it is up to oneself how one plays them.

That people are somehow mysteriously responsible for aspects of their lot in life that seem to be beyond their control is an idea that many have found attractive. Max Weber, for example, wrote that the theory of karma was "the most consistent theodicy ever produced by history" (121). The primary function of the doctrine from the perspective of the sociology of religion does seem to be, loosely speaking, "to justify the ways of God to men." In the

Milindapañha, Nāgasena appeals to the workings of karma to answer the question why there is so much seemingly unwarranted inequality and suffering in the world: "It is through a difference in their karma that men are not all alike, but some long-lived and some short-lived, some healthy and some sickly, some handsome and some ugly, some powerful and some weak, some rich and some poor, some of high degree and some of low degree, some wise and some foolish" (Warren 215).

Thus the doctrine of karma is often presented as providing a philosophical solution to the existential problem of evil[76]: the unfairness of what Rawls calls the "natural lottery" is explained away as being merely apparent. But despite its initial attractiveness, further reflection reveals that Weber's positive assessment cannot be maintained. The Buddhist version of karma cannot be made to function as a "cosmodicy"[77] owing to various philosophical difficulties. Under the heading of metaphysics and epistemology, three main problems can be identified. First, the compatibility of the theories of *punarbhava* and *anātman*, or rebirth and selflessness, has been questioned; second, the theory has been criticized as implausible; and third, it seems to be untestable. But even if these difficulties could be dealt with, three specifically cosmodicical concerns remain: there is a regress problem, an ultimate responsibility problem, and a victim blaming problem. In the following section I will conduct a brief survey of these six issues.

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[76] Recall from chapter 3 that by the "existential problem of evil" I mean the threat to faith in the justice of God or the goodness of life that the experience of various evils poses for the individual.

[77] Nietzsche borrowed the word "cosmodicy," patterned after the word "theodicy," from his friend Erwin Rhode. A cosmodicy is a kind of attempt to vindicate the goodness of the cosmos.

2. Objections to a Karmic Cosmodicy

The first objection to the doctrine of karma—that *punarbhava,* or rebirth, is incompatible with *anātman,* or selflessness—is one of the most common charges brought against Buddhism, and as a result it is one to which Buddhist philosophers have developed comprehensive responses. The details of these responses need not concern us here, as the purpose of this chapter is not to explore the metaphysics of personal identity, but I think it can be said that the Buddhist view of *punarbhava* is no more problematic than the orthodox Indian view of reincarnation. According to Buddhism, there is no substantial entity that is reincarnated in various bodies; rather there is a causal correlation that obtains between the processes that constitute successive lives. Buddhist philosophers use various analogies to clarify the nature of this relation. Nāgasena explains, for instance, that just as the flame of one lamp that is lit from another is neither fully identical to nor fully distinct from the first flame, so a person who is born in such and such circumstances as a result of the activities of a previously existing person is neither fully identical to nor fully distinct from that preceding person. Given that a particular woman can be identified as my mother, as opposed to yours, because of the special relation of ontological dependence that I bear to her, but that you do not, perhaps my present life could be associated with some particular deceased person's life because it is ontologically dependent on it in some comparable way. Of course, it is another question entirely whether there are any good grounds for supposing that this is how things really are, but all I am suggesting here is that at least the Buddhist account of rebirth does

not suffer from obvious incoherence. Next though, I want to turn to the claim that there are very good grounds for supposing that things are *not* like this.

The second objection to the metaphysics of karma is that a causal mechanism whereby it might operate is almost impossible to conceive of. It would require coordinated action at a distance of an unbelievably complicated nature. A person who purposely hit himself over the head with a hammer could not reasonably complain of injustice because it hurt. The pain felt would not be punishment for sin, but rather the natural outcome of foolishness. The law of karma describes scenarios in which the clockwork of suffering is a great deal more intricate. But if one had insight and foresight enough, it is claimed, one would understand that the principle is the same in each case. According to the *Dhammapada,* it is our limited knowledge of cause and effect that makes hardship look like it descends from the blue: "The childish one thinks it is like honey / While the bad [he has done] is not yet matured. / But when the bad [he has done] is matured, / Then the childish one comes by suffering….For a bad act done does not coagulate / Like freshly extracted milk. / Burning, it follows the childish one, / Like fire concealed in ashes" (Carter and Palihawadana 14; 69 – 71). In the end each of us must face the results of our deportment towards others, because none of us is a self-sufficient individual. Because, as Hua-yen Buddhism especially teaches, "no man is an island," everything is perplexedly interlinked and ontologically interdependent. Thus, certain acts, by which it may have seemed that a person could profit at another's expense, are in reality said to be akin to sawing off the branch on which she sits. Everything affects, and is affected in turn by, everything else, so an injury to anything has open-ended

repercussions. In upsetting the cosmic balance, perpetrators of misdeeds only set themselves up as future victims. One would do well to ask before acting, with Prufrock, "Do I dare/ Disturb the universe?"

But if indeed, as the Buddhists claim on the basis of commonsense experience, we are all intimately interconnected and our lives impinge on each others' in convoluted and complex ways, a bewildering number of variables would have to be initialized at each person's birth in such a manner that everybody involved gets their exact "karmic comeuppance." And since the hedonic index of my life is—at least in part—a function of the hedonic index of yours, which is likewise a function of somebody else's again, a byzantine confluence of individual karmic factors would be necessary if things were to work out as they should. Thus, as James P. McDermott explains, "a fratricide could only be born of parents who because of their past *kamma* deserved the suffering that results from the violent loss of a child, who in turn deserved to suffer such a death at the hands of his brother as punishment for his own past deeds" (175). In addition, since the parents' friends must deserve the vicarious suffering caused by sharing in another's grief and so on *ad infinitum*, the doctrine of karma requires that each person's receiving his or her precise due is compossible with all other people's receiving theirs.

Such a possibility, however, appears *prima facie* highly unlikely. It is hard to cut a cake at a child's birthday party without somebody complaining that they didn't get their fair share. How could funds from the cosmic karmic kitty be automatically allocated and innumerable people not be shortchanged? It would be like trying to fill in an enormous Sudoku grid and finding that every time one got a column, row, or box to add up, one had

inadvertently made a mess of another. Or, to vary the metaphor, a Buddhist who believes in karma seems committed to the view that an indefinitely large number of indefinitely long simultaneous hedonic equations has somehow been solved mechanically in advance, since *ex hypothesi* there is no divine decree or intelligence guiding the process.

In a word, a fully naturalistic theory of karma would appear to be as implausible a cosmology as psychophysical parallelism is a theory of mind. In the absence of some Godlike being who could institute a pre-established harmony between actions and their consequences, that the interactions of innumerable agents always served in the long run to produce outcomes in which all agents got exactly their due would be a truly staggering coincidence. Positing some mechanism to explain this coincidence would presumably require constructing an immensely more complex theory than rival accounts that only needed to explain physical and not karmic consequences of events, and thus, unless the invariable existence of such karmic consequences could be firmly established, one had better prefer some simpler theory on the basis of the principle of parsimony.

The third objection to the doctrine of karma is epistemological: as a theory, it is inherently untestable, and thus undeserving of respect. The postulation of rebirth serves as an escape clause which can be used to explain away any counterexamples to the rule that good deeds are inevitably rewarded and misdeeds eventually paid for. Buddhists claim that the details of the theory can be verified by fully enlightened beings, and that, unlike most of us, the Buddha was able to recollect clearly all of his past lives, but such a

claim is unlikely to persuade anybody not already convinced.[78] To the believer, karma does at least as good a job of accounting for apparent cosmic injustice as the notion of a just God does for the theist, but to the skeptic, the theory is no better in this regard than the fallback claim in the face of horrendous evils that God works in mysterious ways. In response to this objection, Karl Potter interestingly suggests that karma may be better thought of as a principle rather than a law, like the principle of sufficient reason in philosophy, or the causal "hypothesis" in science ("Naturalistic Principle"). Apparent falsifications are always disallowed and the principle is thereby safeguarded. If we cannot find a cause in past action for present suffering, we are simply advised to keep looking. The principle of karma on this view becomes a presupposition of moral inquiry, and is more like an imperative, injunction or exhortation than an empirical claim. But in the absence of the kind of pragmatic considerations that justify the use of the principle of causality in science, the karmic hypothesis looks at least as precarious as the principle of sufficient reason.

The first of the distinctively cosmodical problems that karma faces is the regress problem. The postulation of a beginningless series of rebirths endlessly defers

[78] Furthermore, even if, as seems highly improbable, we could obtain incontrovertible scientific evidence of a person's recollecting particulars of a past life that could not have been discovered by any ordinary means of knowledge, it would be open to an empirically minded thinker to interpret such a case in more than one way. Might we not prefer to say, asks A.J. Ayer, that the person in question has somehow "picked up" the memories of another, than that she was remembering her own previous existence? (127). It seems that we have no clear criteria for deciding between these competing ways of speaking in this case. If it could be established that the character of the person presently alive was almost identical to that of the person whose life she purportedly remembers, this might favor the Buddhist interpretation, but identical personality traits would seem to be impossible given the fact that the cultural and historical influences on the two individuals are going to be different, and the very reasonable assumption, which a Buddhist would be reluctant to dispute, that our identity is, in large measure, shaped by such pervasive influences.

explanation of the ultimate source of suffering. Any given instance of suffering can theoretically be accounted for, but the existence of suffering as a whole cannot. It remains a brute fact. John Hick, in his *Philosophy of Religion,* takes this position (139 – 40), while Roy Perrett, in his "Karma and the Problem of Suffering," attempts to defend the adequacy of the theory of karma as an account of the origin of suffering against the charges that Hick brings. The disagreement over this issue is similar to that over certain versions of the cosmological argument, with theists insisting that there must be some sort of ultimate explanation of the whole, whereby contingent existence is grounded in necessary existence, and non-theists objecting that no such totalistic account exists, and that all chains of explanation must come to an end.

The second cosmodical problem can be framed as a dilemma. Either the doctrine of karma is compatible with metaphysical or libertarian freedom of the will, or it is not. If it is, then the fact that persons can behave in ways that are unpredictable in principle would seem in certain cases to cause suffering for others that cannot be explained in karmic terms, since on a strict cosmodicical theory of karma, any suffering that I undergo can be fully explained by my own past actions. But if metaphysical freedom exists, then the future is not determined by the past, and it is open to an agent to actualize either one of several possible futures regardless of past circumstances, including any actions of mine. So given that I am impacted by the decisions that others make, and given too that the decisions that others make in a libertarian cosmos could be entirely unconditioned by anything that has already occurred, I can be negatively impacted in such a cosmos in

ways that are unrelated to my own past actions. In short, there is no way things could have been "set up" in advance to prevent my suffering unfairly.[79]

Taking the other horn of the dilemma, if karma is *incompatible* with metaphysical freedom, then one could argue that since nobody is ultimately responsible for his actions, nobody deserves to suffer as a result of them either. For in a deterministic world without genuine alternative possibilities, as opposed to merely epistemic ones, nothing that I do is truly "up to me," but all events, including all actions of mine, are the inexorable effects of causes in the long distant past, and I can never do otherwise than I do in fact do.[80] This line of thought is essentially what Peter van Inwagen has called the consequence argument.

The third and final criticism of karma as a cosmodicy is that it is ethically repugnant. In no sense could some of what people suffer be considered a fair punishment for even the most heinous crimes. Life doles out cruel and unusual punishments such as slow torture ending in death that even the most zealous proponent of retribution would not countenance in the human sphere. It could, and often has, been argued that the

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[79] This problem is related to the compatibility of freedom with God's foreknowledge, which is a notoriously thorny issue in religious metaphysics. Whether foreknowledge could be reconciled with freedom by virtue of God's extratemporal existence or some other stratagem is a recondite enough question, but the question whether there might somehow be some non-conscious and naturalistic "knowledge" built into the karmic nexus which would allow for libertarian freedom and yet ensure that no suffering will be undeserved is more recondite yet. It seems to me anyway, without pursuing the issue in detail, that a negative answer is most plausible in both cases.

[80] On a related note, it has frequently been argued that belief in karma engenders fatalism and social apathy. Although Buddhists rejected the Indian caste system, they retained the doctrine of karma from the *āstika*, or Vedic, tradition. The more radically heterodox *Lokāyata,* or materialist, school rejected the theory of karma too as constituting an ideological rationalization of caste system oppression and injustice, arguing that it effectively functioned to delegitimize any critique of the status quo by defending social inequality as merited by the differing actions of persons in their past lives.

supposition that there is no such thing as undeserved suffering seems morally repulsive in many cases. Looking at things from a karmic point of view always demands that one "blame the victim." If nobody suffers undeservedly, then there is also a sense in which nobody does wrong, since it is always true that in acting—however I act—I am merely an "instrument" of the process by which persons get what they have coming. "Innocent" children that are kidnapped and raped and casualties of terrorist attacks have no cause to complain. Indeed, it seems hard to know what one could say to a demented bomber who reasoned as follows: since according to the law of karma, people do not suffer undeservedly, it must be the case that whoever happens to be there in the café at the moment I explode the bomb is there because of their karma, and thus I do no wrong in killing them for my cause. (Incidentally, I am not aware of any case in which a bomber has actually reasoned this way—which is not of course to say that no such case exists.) This is a powerful criticism, and indeed few persons would have the stomach to attempt constructing a serious defense against it. Since I do not myself think that such a defense can be mounted, I am not going to try to do so here.

3. Alternative Views of Karma

"That spot in the world is not found, / Neither in the sky nor in the ocean's depths, / Nor having entered into a cleft in the mountains, / Where abiding, one would be released from the bad deed," runs a well known verse from the *Dhammapada* (Carter and Palihawadana 24; 127). Thus, on a populist karmic cosmodicy, just as no suffering is

undeserved, conversely, no misdeed is exempt from negative results. But Nietzsche rejects all worldviews that postulate an inexorable system of retribution on both epistemological and ethical grounds. First, the view that such a system exists is not supported by the evidence, and second, he claims that the belief in such a system does more harm, in breeding guilt and fear, than good, in deterring certain forms of behavior. Thus he calls the concept of a "moral world order" a "delusion" and writes that there is "*absolutely no eternal necessity* which decrees that every guilt will be atoned and paid for—that such a thing exists has been a dreadful and only to a minuscule extent useful delusion" (*Daybreak* 563). Traditional moral psychology, Nietzsche argues, rests on discredited metaphysical assumptions. We no longer ascribe gender to the heavenly bodies, but we persist in attributing our suffering to the influence of non-existent factors—a way of thinking, according to him, which is equally mythological:

> *The whole realm of morality and religion belongs under [the] concept of imaginary causes*. The "explanation" of *disagreeable* general feelings. They are produced by beings that are hostile to us (evil spirits: the most famous case—the misunderstanding of the hysterical as witches). They are produced by acts which cannot be approved (the feeling of "sin," of "sinfulness," is slipped under a physiological discomfort; one always finds reasons for being dissatisfied with oneself). They are produced as punishments, as payment for something we should not have done, for what we should not have *been* (impudently generalized by Schopenhauer into a principle in which morality appears as what it really is——as the very poisoner and slanderer of life: "Every great pain, whether physical or spiritual, declares what we deserve; for it could not come to use if we did not deserve it." *World as Will and Representation* II,666). (TI 6.6)

But despite the fact that—both in Western scholarly circles and in Buddhist cultures in Asia—the Buddhist theory of karma has been interpreted in narrowly cosmodicical terms, there are texts in the Pāli canon that weigh against such an interpretation. In the *Tittha Sutta,* the Buddha criticizes those who hold the deterministic view that "[w]hatever a person experiences—pleasant, painful, or neither pleasant nor painful—that is all caused by what was done in the past," and argues pragmatically that the belief that *everything* about a person was the product of past actions would lead to a debilitating form of fatalism: "When one falls back on what was done in the past as being essential, monks, there is no desire, no effort [at the thought], 'This should be done. This shouldn't be done.' When one can't pin down as a truth or reality what should & shouldn't be done, one dwells bewildered & unprotected. One cannot righteously refer to oneself as a contemplative" (*Tittha Sutta*). And in the *Sīvaka Sutta* the Buddha unambiguously explains to a wandering ascetic that it is *not* the case that all the pleasures, pains and mental states in general that people experience are caused by their own previous deeds:

> Also, Sîvaka, in this connexion, there are some sufferings originating from phlegm, from wind, from the union of bodily humours, from changes of the seasons, from stress of untoward happenings, from sudden attacks from without, also from ripeness of one's karma, Sîvaka,—as you ought to know by experience. And this fact, Sîvaka, that sufferings originate from ripeness of one's karma, is generally acknowledged by the world as true. Now, Sîvaka, the recluses and brahmins who say thus, who hold this view: "Whatsoever pleasure or pain or mental state a human being experiences, all that is due to a previous

> act," herein they go beyond personal experience and what is generally acknowledged by the world. Wherefore do I declare those recluses and brahmins to be in the wrong.' (Woodward, *Kindred Sayings* 4: 155; *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 36.21)

The Buddha here explicitly agrees with Nietzsche that the tendency to slip the feeling of "sinfulness" under a physiological discomfort is—at least sometimes—misguided. His attention to somatic aspects of our moral life prompted Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo* to call him a "profound physiologist" (EH 1.6). And although this deflationary account immediately precludes the possibility of constructing a comprehensive cosmodicy along karmic lines, it opens the door to other—in my view—more interesting readings.

Contemporary Buddhists are divided on the question whether one ought to accept an unreconstructed version of the doctrine of karma and rebirth. On one side, traditionalists like David Kalupahana insist that a literal version of the doctrine is central to Buddhism. "Karma and rebirth are two aspects of life personally verified by the Buddha through extrasensory perception," he writes (*Buddhist Philosophy* 44), rejecting the common suggestion that belief in these doctrines was uncritically inherited from the mainstream Brahmanic tradition, and quoting K. N. Jayatilleke for support: "In fact, that a belief is found in a stratum A and a chronologically successive stratum B, provides no conclusive evidence that the thinkers of the stratum B uncritically and dogmatically accept it from the stratum A" (qtd. in Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy* 44 – 45). Jayatilleke's point is well taken, but few who are not already committed to Buddhist

orthodoxy are likely to accept extrasensory perception as a reliable *prāmana* or means of knowledge, and in the absence of further evidence, the most reasonable explanation for belief in karma and rebirth seems to be some kind of appeal to the influence of tradition. Thus, on the other side, revisionist scholars like David Loy suggest that a non-literal reading of karma and rebirth may be more faithful to the spirit of Buddhism:

> One of the most basic principles of Buddhism is interdependence, but I wonder if we realize what that implies about the original teachings of the Buddha. Interdependence means that nothing has any "self-existence" because everything is dependent upon other things, which are themselves dependent upon other things, and so forth. All things originate and pass away according to causes and conditions. Yet Buddhism, we believe, originated in the unmediated experience of Shakyamuni Buddha, who became an "awakened one" when he attained nirvana under the Bodhi tree….That enlightenment story, as usually told, amounts to a myth of self-origination—something Buddhism denies! If the interdependence of everything is true for everything, the truth of Buddhism could not have sprung up independently from all the other spiritual beliefs of the Buddha's time and place (i.e., Iron Age India), without any relationship to them. Instead, the teachings of Shakyamuni must be understood as a *response* to those other teachings, but a response that, inevitably, also *presupposed* many of the spiritual beliefs current in that culture—for example, popular Indian notions of karma and rebirth, which were becoming widespread at that time. (56)

In framing this interesting social constructivist style argument for a non-literal reading of karma and rebirth, Loy claims that *pratītya-samutpāda*—that is, dependent origination or interdependence—is identical with *nisvabhāva,* or the absence of self-existence in all phenomena. This claim is the central plank of the *Madhymaka* theory of

śūnyatā, or emptiness, and in making it, Loy implicitly labels himself as a follower of the Mahāyāna. In the Mahāyāna the early Buddhist doctrine of karma and rebirth has generally tended to be seen as a special case of the broader doctrine of causality under which it is subsumed, and thus to some extent it loses its distinct identity as a quasi-moral doctrine of intentional action. But even apart from Mahāyāna influenced arguments, there are good textual reasons based on Pāli canon passages to be critical of any perceived aspect of Buddhism, including karma, that is epistemically problematic. One well-known resource in this regard in the *Kālāma Sutta,* in which the Buddha cautions his audience members from a clan called the Kālāmas against forming dogmatic judgments on controversial topics:

> Indeed, it is proper to be in doubt, Kālāmas, and to be perplexed. When there is a doubtful situation, perplexity arises. In such cases, do not accept a thing by recollection, by tradition, by mere report, because it is based on the authority of scriptures, by mere logic or inference, by reflection on conditions, because of reflection on or fondness for a certain theory, because it merely seems suitable, not thinking: "The religious wanderer is respected by us." But when you know for yourselves: "These things are unwholesome, blameworthy, reproached by the wise, when undertaken and performed lead to harm and suffering"—these you should reject. (Holder 21)

Although two *prāmana,* or sources of knowledge, namely perception and inference, are traditionally accepted in Buddhism as veridical, in this passage the Buddha seems to cast doubt even on the reliability of inference in favor of pragmatic considerations. Such pragmatic considerations become yet more prominent later in the

sutra when, in a passage that some have seen as foreshadowing Pascal's wager, the Buddha argues that following the path of the dharma is prudent regardless of the truth of karma and rebirth:

> [The noble disciple thinks:] "If there is an after-world, if there is the fruit and result of actions that are good or evil, then I will be reborn at the breaking up of the body, after death, in a place that is happy, a heavenly world." This is the first comfort he attains. He thinks: "If there is no after-world, no fruit and result of actions that are good or evil, then here in the visible world I will keep myself free from hatred, untroubled, free from vexation, and happy." This is the second comfort he attains. (Holder 24)

So it seems that, initially at least, it is possible to engage in Buddhist practice without committing oneself to the literal truth of karma and rebirth, and that the benefits which thereby accrue to one are independent of belief in these tenets. Here, as elsewhere, pragmatic considerations are privileged over epistemic ones, and praxis is stressed over orthodoxy. In short, it seem feasible—according to the Buddha himself, if one reads the *Kālāma Sutta* as an accurate transcription of his words—to be a Buddhist of sorts without adhering to a cosmodicical or a literal doctrine of karma. In light of this, I propose to consider three reconstructions of karmic theory in what follows alongside some similar themes in Nietzsche's thought. In the remaining sections of the present chapter, I will first consider a psychological theory of karma that recalls elements of Nietzsche's philosophy of self-cultivation, and I will then consider an "ecological" theory of interdependence that can usefully be compared to Nietzsche's *amor fati.* I leave a

discussion of the third "praxological" theory of karmic versus non-karmic action for the sixth and final chapter of the dissertation.

4. A Psychological Reading of Karma

In Buddhism only volitional actions (that is, actions proper as distinct from mere bodily movements) give rise to karmic consequences. As opposed to the Jain conception, for example, one who inadvertently treads on an insect does not thereby accrue bad karma. Only deeds motivated by malice recoil upon the agent. This stress on *cetanā,* or intention, invites a naturalized interpretation of karma in which the reciprocal influence of conduct on character forms the principal strand. The emphasis that the tradition places on psychological factors is evident when one considers the first two verses of the *Dhammapada*—arguably the most popular text in the Pāli canon:

> Preceded by perception [*manas*] are mental states [*dhammas*],
> For them is perception supreme,
> From perception they have sprung.
> If, with perception polluted, one speaks or acts,
> Thence suffering follows
> As a wheel the draught ox's foot.
>
> Preceded by perception are mental states,
> For them is perception supreme,
> From perception they have sprung.
> If, with tranquil perception, one speaks or acts,

Thence ease follows
As a shadow that never departs. (Carter and Palihawadana 3; 1 – 2)

Sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character, as the saying goes. Repeated unwholesome thoughts fuelled by greed, hatred, and delusion, gradually corrupt the agent, by imprinting *saṃskāras,* or dispositions, on the psyche that tend towards suffering in the long run. Frequent engagement in negative behavior makes one less likely to enjoy positive mental states in future. If one always indulges, and never overcomes one's vices, one naturally ends up as a slave to them. By habitually giving in to weakness, the ability to handle trying situations is destroyed. Thus one is vulnerable to greater suffering than would otherwise be the case. The karmic doctrine that a person's suffering is self-inflicted can thus be read not as a metaphysical thesis, but as a pragmatic injunction to attend to the ways in which unintelligent patterns of reaction get one into difficulty. Unlike some others, this reading of karma is empowering rather than enfeebling, since it causes one to focus on self-induced suffering—the species of suffering that one is best placed to do something about. It is why the chief purpose of Buddhist psychology is the systematic nurturing of resourceful states of mind.

According to the Buddhist view, similar thoughts and similar deeds can lead to different results depending on one's level of psychological and spiritual development. The aftermath of a peccadillo is not the same for everybody:

Whenever... an individual is not proficient in the management of his body, is not proficient in the precepts, is not proficient in concentration, is not proficient in

> wisdom, and is limited and bounded, and abides in what is finite and evil: such an individual...is he whose slight deed of wickedness brings him to hell....Whenever...an individual is proficient in the management of his body, is proficient in the precepts, is proficient in concentration, is proficient in wisdom, and is not limited, nor bounded, and abides in the universal: such an individual...is he who does the same slight deed of wickedness, and expiates it in the present life, though it may be in a way which appears to him not slight but grievous. (Warren 218; *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 3.99)

To better elucidate this disparity, the Buddha uses the analogy of a pinch of salt. If one were to throw it into a small cup of water, the water would become salty and undrinkable. But if the same pinch of salt were to be tossed into the Ganges, the subsequent change would be unnoticeable. An act is not considered in isolation, but in context, and many factors, such as the personality and circumstances of the agent, influence its eventual outcome. Speaking proverbially, one could perhaps say that to the pure all things are pure.

There are at least two ways to interpret the above passage. A tantric or antinomian reading is possible on which acts that are generally frowned upon are permissible for members of an initiated elite. The belief that in certain circumstances one is released from the obligation to observe the precepts is prevalent in the Mahāyāna, where bodhisattvas acting from compassion may go as far as to preemptively kill potential murderers to prevent them from accruing bad karma. The fact that such beliefs are open to abuse hardly needs to be insisted on. The recent history of Zen Buddhism, to take just one instance, has been severely compromised by institutional acquiescence in

Japanese fascism and militaristic imperialism. Prominent Zen masters from whom one might have expected better supported the Japanese war machine with woolly sophisms about the relativity of good and evil and the unreality of death.[81] Moving on, if one reflects that many moral injunctions are urged on people with a view to the negative consequences of failing to observe them in mind, it becomes easier to see how some individuals consider that they have seen through the rationale behind such injunctions, and can safely engage in prohibited behavior without fear of the consequences that would normally attend violations of the rules. Thus, for instance, the mystical Sufi poet Rumi explains that alcohol is forbidden in Islam because it tends to make people belligerent, but for a Sufi, who harbors no violence, its consumption is harmless. A rather mundane example of the same principle is probably familiar to anybody who spends much time in libraries. One is aware of the prohibition against reshelving books, but one breaks it occasionally when one is certain that one is placing the book back in the right position if not to do so might result in the book's being unavailable the following morning.

But another more modest reading suggests itself as perhaps the more natural one here. A slight deed of wickedness may bring an unproficient person to hell, so to speak, while a proficient person may get away with it, since the unproficient person lacks the self-control which typifies proficiency, and may be tempted to follow one misdeed with another more serious one and so on. To vary Rumi's example, one drink may be harmless for an ordinary person, but lethal for an alcoholic.

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[81] See Brian Daizen Victoria's *Zen at War* for an account of Zen's implication in Japanese aggression during the Second World War.

Moving back to Nietzsche, although, as we saw above, he would have little sympathy for a karmic cosmodicy, there are many passages in his work that are in keeping with this psychological reading of karma. "The consequences of our actions take hold of us," he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, "quite indifferent to the claim that meanwhile we have 'improved'" (179). Far from being incompatible with the doctrine of karma, this aphorism reads like a précis of it.

The question of the extent to which the quality of a person's life is a function of temperamental and behavioral rather than environmental factors is one that preoccupied Nietzsche from very early on. In the essay "Fate and History," which he wrote when he was only seventeen, he highlights the process by virtue of which the interdependent causes of phenomenal consciousness, both internal and external, mutually condition each other:

> What determines our happiness in life? Do we have to thank events whose whirlpool carries us away? Or is not our temperament, as it were, the coloration of events? Do we not encounter everything in the mirror of our personality? And do not events provide, as it were, only the key of our history while the strength or weakness with which it affects us depends only on our temperament?...But our temperament is nothing other than our mind, upon which the impressions of our relationships and experiences [*Verhältnisse und Ereignisse*] have been stamped. (NR 14)

In a section of *Daybreak* titled *"Experience and invention,"* Nietzsche theorizes that dream experiences are caused by different drives unconsciously interpreting the

various physiological stimuli that we receive during sleep, and that although we have less freedom of interpretation when we are awake and our senses are functioning, "there is no *essential* difference between waking and dreaming," since "all our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text":

> Take some trifling experience. Suppose we were in the market place one day and we noticed someone laughing at us as we went by: this event will signify this or that to us according to whether this or that drive happens at that moment to be at its height in us—and it will be a quite different event according to the kind of person we are. One person will absorb it like a drop of rain, another will shake it from him like an insect, another will try to pick a quarrel, another will examine his clothing to see if there is anything about it that might give rise to laughter, another will be led to reflect on the nature of laughter as such, another will be glad to have involuntarily augmented the amount of cheerfulness and sunshine in the world—and in each case a drive has gratified itself, whether it be the drive to annoyance or to combativeness or to reflection or to benevolence. This drive seized the event as its prey: why precisely this one? Because, thirsty and hungry, it was lying in wait. (119)

So Nietzsche writes that "[i]f one has character"—or in other words, if one has managed to discipline oneself so that the structure of one's drives is relatively stable—"one also has one's typical experience, which recurs repeatedly" (BGE 70). When Zarathustra muses that "in the end one experiences only oneself," he gives poetic expression to this idea that the way events impinge upon us is determined by the economy of our psychic life: "The time is gone when mere accidents could still happen to

me; and what could still come to me now that was not mine already? What returns, what finally comes home to me, is my own self and what of myself has long been in strange lands and scattered among all things and accidents" (3.1). Speaking in his own voice in *Ecce Homo,* Nietzsche says that "a well-turned-out-person…is always in his own company, whether he associates with books, human beings, or landscapes" (1.2).

The prominent functional role that drives or impulses [*Triebe*] play in Nietzsche's psychology of experience is closely analogous to that played by the above mentioned *saṃskāras,* or dispositions, in Buddhist psychology. The word *saṃ-skāra,* which literally means "com-ponent," can be translated "volitional factor" or "karmic formation." The *saṃskāras* are the second link in the twelvefold chain of dependent origination, conditioned by ignorance, and themselves in turn conditioning consciousness. Since "[e]ach of our perceptions is a mixed bag of memories, concepts, [*saṃskāras*], and material elements, Kalupahana writes, "[a] pure percept, undiluted by such conditions, is *not* recognized by the Buddha or any subsequent psychologist who has remained faithful to the Buddha" (*History of Buddhist Philosophy* 71).

Nietzsche includes a cryptic aphorism in the "Epigrams and Interludes" chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil:* "Terrible experiences pose the riddle whether the person who has them is not terrible" (89). On a cursory reading it looks like Nietzsche is allowing that Schopenhauer's claim that we deserve all the suffering that we undergo may be true: the aphorism can be interpreted as a suggesting a crudely moralistic reading of karma. But the key to a subtler psychological reading of the riddle is to be found at the end of the above quoted section of *Daybreak.* On this view it is not so much that bad things happen

to bad people, so to speak, as it is that different people experience similar things in characteristically different ways: "What then are our experiences? Much *more* that which we put into them than that which they already contain! Or must we go so far as to say: in themselves they contain nothing? To experience is to invent?—[*Erleben ist ein Erdichten?*—]" (119). Although some postmodern Nietzscheans and Mahāyāna Buddhists do go so far as to say that our experiences in themselves [*unsere Erlebnisse an sich*] contain nothing, both Nietzsche and the Buddha are more circumspect on this question, and Nietzsche's considered position appears to be that it is unanswerable:

> How far the perspective character of existence extends or indeed whether existence has any other character than this; whether existence without interpretation, without "sense," does not become "nonsense"; whether, on the other hand, all existence is not actively engaged in *interpretation*—that cannot be decided even by the most industrious and most scrupulously conscientious analysis and self examination of the intellect; for in the course of the analysis the human intellect cannot avoid seeing itself in its own perspectives, and *only* in these. (GS 374)

In short, it is probably fair to say that neither Nietzsche nor the Buddha would advise ignoring environmental factors—whatever ontological status we end up attributing to them—but that both are reluctant to answer the strictly metaphysical question *exactly* how dominant the role of dispositions is, preferring instead to emphasize for pragmatic reasons the dominant role that drives and *saṃskāras* play in the formation of character

and thus experience. What we ought to do is pay close attention to those aspects of our "situation" about which *we are in a situation to do something:*

> *Slow cures*.—Like those of the body, the chronic sicknesses of the soul arise very rarely from one single gross offence against the rationality of body and soul but usually from countless little unheeded instances of neglect.—He, for example, who day by day breathes too weakly and thus takes too little air into his lungs, even though it be to an infinitesimal degree, finally falls victim to a chronic lung infection: in such a case, the only cure is to take countless little exercises in the opposite direction; to make it a rule, for example, to take strong and deep breaths every quarter of an hour (when possible lying flat on the floor; a watch which chimes the quarters must then become a permanent companion). All these cures are petty and *slow*; and he who wishes to cure his soul must also consider making changes to the very pettiest of his habits. Many a man curses his environment ten times a day and pays little heed to the fact, and especially not to the fact that after a few years he has created for himself a *law* of habit which henceforth *compels* him to put his environment out of temper ten times a day. But he can also acquire the habit of conferring a benefit upon it ten times a day! (D 462)

This remarkable passage on the importance of constant mindfulness in the process of gradual self-discipline is thoroughly Buddhist in spirit, even down to the felicitous example of inattention to one's breathing that Nietzsche chooses to illustrate unheeded neglect. The *Dhammapada* stresses the way that one develops or deteriorates little by little:

> Gradually, would the wise one,
> Bit by bit, moment by moment,

Blow out the stain that is one's own,
Like a smith the stain of silver

As rust springs from iron,
Springing from that, eats that itself,
So one's own actions lead
One of unwise conduct to a state of woe. (Carter and Palihawadana 43; 239 – 40)

Since people's repeated actions alter them slowly but surely, just as a creeper steadily overspreads a tree, for example (30; 162), or falling drops of water fill a pot (23; 121 – 2), practitioners are repeatedly urged to exercise vigilance with respect to the "countless little exercises" that they perform. Such sentiments—which also abound in East Asian Buddhist schools, all of which were influenced to some degree by the Confucian ethic of self-cultivation—may sound like little more than virtue ethical platitudes when expressed out of context, but their transformative potential must be appreciated in light of the functional role that they play in the traditions in which they are embedded. Dale S. Wright points out the "exceptionally insightful" kinds of account that demythologized karmic theories provide of "the enormous importance of ordinary daily practice or customs of behavior, what we habitually do during the day often without reflection or choice—the ways we do our work and manage our time, the ways we daydream, or cultivate resentment, or lose ourselves in distractions, down to the very way we eat and breathe" (90). Post-Christian Western culture has few resources to draw upon when it comes to techniques of lifelong self-discipline, and thus has had to borrow yoga and other systems of meditation from India, and various Buddhist inspired martial and

other arts from China and Japan to fill this gap. The attention paid to the details of one's quotidian routine, Wright claims, "is clearly a strong point in Buddhist ethics":

> On [a naturalistic] understanding of karma, which was closely related to the development of meditation, ethics is largely a matter of daily practice, understood as the self-conscious cultivation of ordinary life and mentality towards the approximation of an ideal defined by images of human excellence, the awakened arhats and bodhisattvas. To an extent not found in other religious and philosophical traditions, Buddhists saw that ethics is only rarely about difficult and monumental decisions, and that, in preparing yourself for life, it is much more important to focus on what you do with yourself moment by moment than it is to attempt to imagine how you will solve the major moral crises when they arrive. They seem to have realized that it is only through disciplined practices of daily self-cultivation that you would be in a mental position to handle the big issues when they do come up. (90 – 91)

This focus on one's everyday behavior is a vital part of Nietzsche's thought too. He constantly carries out various "experiments in living" and insists that "small things which are generally considered matters of complete indifference" like "nutrition, place, climate, recreation, the whole casuistry of selfishness—are inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important so far" (EH 2.10). There is a Japanese saying that is popular in Zen archery and fencing, and that Nietzsche would no doubt

emphatically endorse: *"Hyakuren jitoku,"* or "thousands of repetitions, and out of one's true self perfection emerges" (Kushner 13).[82]

5. A Note on Interdependence and *Amor Fati*

I mentioned in passing in the above section that in the Mahāyāna the doctrine of karma came to be thought of primarily as a special case of *pratītya-samutpāda,* or dependent origination, i.e. the general Buddhist theory of causality. This doctrine can be most simply expressed in the phrase *"asmin sati idaṃ bhavati"* (Skt., if this exists, then that arises). Madhyamaka philosophers interpreted dependent origination as *śūnyatā*, which means emptiness or interdependence. On this view, no entity possesses *svabhāva*, or intrinsic nature, since the identity of each entity is constituted by the nexus of conditions in which it participates. Chinese Hua-yen thinkers took this a step further and formulated a holistic metaphysics of interpenetration according to which each entity in existence mutually influences and is influenced by every other. Fazang illustrated this theory by means of the metaphor taken from the *Avataṃsaka*, or Flower Ornament sutra: the image of Indra's net. The world is compared to the fishing net of the Hindu god, into which a jewel is set at each node. Each jewel perfectly reflects the light of every other jewel, and thus, as in a hologram, every part contains an image of the whole. The most famous—and probably the most beautiful—contemporary rendering of this vision of

[82] *"Hyakuren"* literally refers to the process of tempering steel. *"Jitoku"* means self-realization, or spontaneous accomplishment. A related Japanese idiom reflects popular karmic thinking: *"Jigō jitoku"* means "self-deed, self-gain," or in other words, "you get what you deserve."

reality is the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh's description of what he calls "interbeing":

> If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. "Interbeing" is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix "inter-" with the verb "to be," we have a new verb, inter-be. Without a cloud and the sheet of paper inter-are. If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. Even we cannot grow without sunshine. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are. And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too. When we look in this way, we see that without all of these things, this sheet of paper cannot exist. Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too. This is not difficult to see, because when we look at a sheet of paper, the sheet of paper is part of our perception. Your mind is in here and mine is also. So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here—time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper. That is why I think the word inter-be should be in the dictionary. "To be" is to inter-be. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing. This sheet of paper is, because everything else is. Suppose we try to return one of the elements to its source. Suppose we return the sunshine to the sun. Do you think that this sheet of paper will be possible? No, without

> sunshine nothing can be. And if we return the logger to his mother, then we have no sheet of paper either. The fact is that this sheet of paper is made up only of "non-paper elements." And if we return these non-paper elements to their sources, then there can be no paper at all. Without "non-paper elements," like mind, logger, sunshine and so on, there will be no paper. As thin as this sheet of paper is, it contains everything in the universe in it. (*Peace* 95 – 6)

In various notes from the late 1880's Nietzsche denies the existence of intrinsic properties in sketches for an anti-essentialist ontology that is strikingly similar to the *Madhyamaka* theory of emptiness: "The properties of a thing are effects on other 'things,'" he writes, so "if one removes other 'things,' then a thing has no properties, i.e., there is no thing without other things, i.e. there is no 'thing-in-itself'" (WP 557). Additional notes from the same period articulate a view that is even more similar to Hua-yen relational ontology. The relationship between forces, he writes, "is a question, not of succession, but of interpenetration" (WP 631). And in another note he writes, like Thich Nhat Hanh, that "every atom affects the whole of being" (634).

It is on account of this relational ontology that Zarathustra teaches that if "you ever said Yes to a single joy…then you said Yes too to *all* woe," since "[a]ll things are entangled, ensnared, enamored" (4.19.10), and that Nietzsche aspires to "a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange," since "[n]othing in existence may be subtracted, nothing is dispensable" (EH BT 2). Nietzsche's Dionysian faith "that only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole" (TI 9.49) is closely related to the adoption of what Francis H. Cook calls a "totalistic perspective" in his exegesis of

Hua-yen Buddhism: "To see things in a totalistic perspective means to transcend a small, pathetic subjectivity and see all the pernicious, vexing contraries harmonized within the whole." Cook refers to D. T. Suzuki's commentary on a humorous haiku by Basho—"Lice, fleas— / The horse pissing / Beside my pillow"—and points out that "the real world is a world of lice as well as butterflies, horse piss as well as vintage champagne," and claims that in some sense "to the person who has truly realized this, one is as good as the other" (11). The totalistic perspective, Cook insists, makes difficult demands of the person who takes it up:

> [I]t demands of him that he make room not grudgingly or fatalistically, but joyously and with profound gratitude, for the horse urine and lice that do in fact coexist with fine champagne and beautiful butterflies. The totalistic view sees these as no less real, and no less wonderful, once we have transcended a petty, partial view of existence in which our comfort and unslakable thirst determine what has and has not a right to exist. (16)

Nietzsche too insists on the necessity of overcoming a "petty, partial view of existence," and claims that the consequences of abolishing distress of all kinds would be as calamitous as the consequences of somehow "[abolishing] bad weather—say, from pity for poor people." Bad weather and hardship both have a part to play in what he calls "the great economy of the whole" (EH 4.4), the economy that Dōgen appears to have in mind when he asks rhetorically how "[w]ithout bitterest cold that penetrates to the very bone…plum blossoms [could] send forth their fragrance all over the world" (qtd. in

Aitken, *Zen Wave* 9). The demands that Nietzsche makes of himself in formulating his new year's resolution in *The Gay Science* echo those made of the adherent of Hua-yen:

> *For the new year.*—I still live, I still think: I still have to live, for I still have to think. *Sum, ergo cogito: cogito ergo sum.* Today everybody permits himself the expression of his wish and his dearest thought; hence I, too, shall say what it is that I wish from myself today, and what was the first thought to run across my heart this year—what thought shall be for me the reason, warranty, and sweetness of my life henceforth. I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation. And all in all and on the whole: some day I wish to be only a Yes-sayer. (276)

Zarathustra's assertion that if one ever said yes to a single joy, then one said yes to all woe, appears to follow from the relational ontology that he implicitly endorses, according to which the occurrence of *every* event is a necessary condition for the occurrence of *any* event. In other words, given any event *x*, it would not have occurred precisely as it did if any other event that preceded it had failed to occur precisely as it did. Or, on a relational ontology, the occurrence of *each* event entails the occurrence of *all* events, which is why—unless one were willing that absolutely everything be different—"[n]othing in existence may be subtracted, nothing is dispensable" (EH BT 2).

There are some interesting technical issues here that I do not wish to pursue in detail, but that are at least worth a mention. It could be argued that the reasoning that

prompts Nietzsche to adopt the attitude of *amor fati* depends on false assumptions about the nature of "affective logic." In propositional logic, if P is true, and P entails Q, then, necessarily, Q is true. In epistemic logic, if I know that P, and P entails Q, then I do not necessarily know that Q, unless I know that the entailment from P to Q holds. (Though if I know that P, and I know that P entails Q, then I also know that Q.) In affective logic however, matters are more uncertain. Suppose that I am happy that P. Suppose further that given certain metaphysical assumptions, P entails Q, and I know it. It does not seem to follow that I am happy that Q. For consider the following example: I am happy that I am alive. The fact that I am alive entails that the Second World War took place, since if it had not, the course of history would have run differently, my parents would never have met, and I would not have been born. If, while accepting all of this, I still refuse to admit that I am happy that the Second World War took place, it does not seem that I am guilty of any obvious irrationality. To make this even clearer, take some simpler examples. It follows from the fact that I am glad that you corrected your mistakes that you made some mistakes, but it does not follow that I am glad that you made them. And it follows from the fact that I am sorry I missed your wedding that you got married, but not that I am sorry you did.[83] So perhaps, *pace* Nietzsche, one could consistently wish that something were different without being forced to wish that everything were different, and one is not compelled to take the kind of all or nothing attitude to existence that he sometimes wants to urge upon us in his more ecstatic moods.

[83] The last two examples are taken from page 74 of Michael Clark's *Paradoxes from A to Z*.

But setting aside these technical perplexities—which, by the way, apply to Hua-yen totalism too—it is clear what kind of existential considerations motivate Nietzsche to make *amor fati* normative.[84] First, in a note from a list under the heading *Amor fati* (NF-1884, 25[500]), he writes: "It is impossible to prove the existence of individuals. There is nothing solid in the 'personality'" (25[508]). So *amor fati* is the attitudinal corollary of an ontology in which there are no such things as substantial selves. Second, in *Twilight of the Idols,* Nietzsche writes that one ought rather to regard oneself as lacking any fundamentally distinct existence, and as being ontologically dependent on the whole: "The fatality [*Fatalität*] of [the human being's] essence is not to be disentangled from the fatality of all that has been and will be…. One is necessary, one is a piece of fatefulness [*Verhängnis*], one belongs to the whole, one is in the whole…there is nothing besides the whole" (6.8). Third, after having recounted a series of misfortunes in *Ecce Homo,* he writes, "I myself have never suffered from all this; what is *necessary* does not hurt me; *amor fati* is my inmost nature" (CW 4). So a person who exemplifies *amor fati* overcomes the suffering that results from the desire that things be otherwise. Putting these facts together, one can say that in realizing *amor fati,* one abandons the false belief that one possesses a substantial self, identifies instead with the causal nexus of immanent phenomena that constitutes one as the being that one is, and overcomes suffering as a

[84] Whereas love simpliciter is just an emotion, love of *x* may be either a virtue or a vice depending on the object of the emotion. What I mean by saying that Nietzsche makes love of fate normative is that he regards it as a virtue. I am using this expression in order to avoid ambiguous constructions such as "Nietzsche's *amor fati,*" which could be taken to refer to either a theory that he espoused or a virtue that he exemplified. My position is that Nietzsche sometimes—but not always—succeeds in exemplifying what he takes to be the virtue of *amor fati.* He exemplifies it when, for instance, he asks in the epigraph to *Ecce Homo, "How could I fail to be grateful to my whole life?"*

consequence of this existential reorientation. But this is just what it is to free oneself from one's bad karma and realize enlightenment in this world in Mahāyāna Buddhism. In the final chapter I consider some implications of the existential reorientation sketched above with respect to the phenomenology of agency.

Chapter 6

Toward a Zen Reading of Nietzsche's Theory of Action

1. Introduction

Theories of action fall into one of three broad categories. There are agent-causation theories, according to which an action is explained as an agent's bringing about of a certain event. There are volitional theories, on which what distinguishes actions from mere events are certain executive mental operations called volitions, acts of will, or choices. And there is the belief-desire model of action, associated with Hume and Davidson among others, which analyzes actions as bodily motions initiated by the onset of particular complexes of beliefs and desires. This model—a version of which Nietzsche subscribes to—is now more or less standard owing to theoretical problems with the agent-causal and volitionist alternatives that I will discuss directly. But while the belief-desire view is theoretically satisfactory, it gives rise to pragmatic and existential problems that some of its proponents have been reluctant to acknowledge.

In this final chapter I argue that Nietzsche did recognize the challenge that the standard belief-desire model of action poses for our traditional self-conception and that he attempted to meet this challenge by developing a view that could be called meta-

compatibilism. This view of the nature of action—which allows that the felt distinction between actions and events is blurred or overcome in certain states of consciousness—plays a critical role in prompting Nietzsche to formulate his conception of *amor fati*, and has deep affinities with Zen Buddhist and Daoist notions of *wu-wei*, or spontaneous activity.

2. Different Theories of Action

An agent is a subject of action; an actor or a doer, as it were. Proponents of agent causation, such as Roderick Chisholm, argue that an acceptable account of the phenomenon of free will requires the existence of an agent who is in some sense independent of the causal nexus. If the only type of causation is event causation, then free will seems difficult to account for, since in this case, actions—a species of event—would be caused by prior events in the natural world, which would themselves have prior causes and so on. According to Peter van Inwagen's "consequence argument," this naturalistic model entails that given the laws of nature, everything I do is a consequence of states of affairs before I was born, so that I cannot be said to be truly responsible for anything I do. In other words, I cannot properly be said to be the author of my deeds. So causally conditioned actions cannot be free in the deep sense of being ultimately "up to me." But neither can free actions be entirely uncaused, for if this were the case they would occur purely at random, and it is hard to see how I could be held responsible for random occurrences any more than I could be held responsible for the inevitable

consequences of events that took place before I even existed. Therefore—so the argument goes—there must be another type of non-natural causation, namely agent causation, which covers the free actions of persons. But agent causation is not a popular view among contemporary philosophers, who complain that the notion of an agent who is somehow outside the causal nexus of the natural world, but who intervenes in it to bring about effects, is mysterious and unscientific. P.F. Strawson famously disparaged proponents of agent causation for their "obscure and panicky metaphysics" (27).

The second family of views—volitional theories—while they seem initially plausible, are also open to a number of objections, and are derided by their critics as exemplifying indefensible forms of "folk psychology." Gilbert Ryle argued that the attempt to explain voluntary actions by means of volitions leads to an infinite regress. For suppose that what makes a physical or mental act voluntary is the presence of a particular kind of mental act, called a volition, that precedes and initiates it. The question now arises whether this mental act is itself voluntary or not. If it is voluntary, then it appears that a regress ensues, since it would then have to be preceded by yet another volition. If not, then it must be itself involuntary. But it is difficult to see how a prior involuntary mental act could serve to explain what makes bodily acts themselves voluntary, since it seems like the involuntariness of the mental act would be transferred to the physical act.

More sophisticated versions of voluntarism are currently making something of a comeback after a long period of disfavor owing to Ryle's attack. But the most popular model of action remains the belief-desire one, and Nietzsche's theory of action falls

under this rubric. On this model, to repeat, my actions are understood as bodily motions caused—and explained—by mental events that can be described as the onset of particular complexes of beliefs and desires. Suppose, for example, that I am thirsty. There is a glass of transparent liquid on the table in front of me. My belief that the liquid in the glass is water, together with my desire to quench my thirst, causes me to reach out and pick up the glass and bring it to my lips.

3. Three Problems for the Belief-Desire Model of Action

The belief-desire model of action is ontologically neutral; there is nothing to prevent its espousal by a dualist or even an idealist. But in practice it tends to be associated with naturalistic worldviews on which the beliefs and desires in question are thought of as supervening on underlying physiological states and changes of state. Many who adopt the model—including Nietzsche—are committed to some version or other of determinism, which Roy C. Weatherford defines as "the thesis that all our mental states and acts, including choices and decisions, and all our actions are effects necessitated by preceding causes." According to determinism the future only appears to us to be open; in reality it is fixed and unchangeable just like the past.

Despite the obdurate insistence to the contrary of compatibilists like Daniel Dennett, it seems clear to me that accepting the view that all of our beliefs and desires are necessitated would entail drastic consequences for our established self-understanding, which is the first problem that a compatibilist belief-desire model of action faces. Most

obviously, if determinism is true then we are not what we pre-theoretically take ourselves to be, namely beings with the ability to actualize one from among numerous metaphysically—not just epistemically—possible futures. Our future simply does not seem fixed to us, and if it is, then most of us—pre-theoretically speaking anyway—are gravely mistaken about the way things really are.

A second problem that determinists face is the danger of becoming entangled in a pragmatic contradiction. A pragmatic contradiction is an "inconsistency arising because of an implicature, or one of the normal implications of saying something, rather than because of the content of what is said" (Blackburn). The standard example is Moore's paradox: "*p* is true, but I do not believe that *p*." If it is true, as some philosophers argue, that—irrespective of the fact of the matter—we cannot help thinking of ourselves as free, then the assertion of determinism involves a pragmatic contradiction. Kant and Sartre, for example, both hold that no matter how we view others, we can only view ourselves *sub specie libertatis*. My claiming that all *x's* mental states and acts are causally necessitated is unproblematic, as is my claiming that *p* is true, but *x* does not believe that *p*, as long as *x* is somebody else.[85] But just as there is something very peculiar in my

[85] Strictly speaking, perhaps one ought to say only that the claim that another person's every thought and act is necessitated is less problematic than the corresponding claim made of oneself. For if consistently to view others as determined requires that one gives up one's "reactive attitudes," and if, as P.F. Strawson argues, it is a brute fact about human nature that such attitudes cannot be given up by beings such as us, then this view suffers from a pragmatic contradiction too. But Strawson's claim that reactive attitudes cannot be relinquished is controversial, and Buddhist literature provides much *prima facie* counterevidence. Recall Śāntideva's claim quoted in chapter three: "If it is their very nature to cause others distress, my anger towards…fools is as inappropriate as it would be towards fire for its nature to burn" (53).

claiming that *p* is true, but *I* do not believe that *p*, so too there is something very peculiar in my claiming that all *my* mental states and acts are causally necessitated, *including the mental state that constitutes my belief in this very claim.* This is sometimes expressed as the thesis that if determinism is true, then nobody has a rational justification for their belief in determinism. Worse, nobody has a rational justification for their belief in *any* proposition, since to have rational justification for a belief is to hold it for a reason, and according to determinism, we hold the beliefs we do not in light of rationally compelling arguments, but owing to physically compelling causes. An objection to this argument in defense of determinism is that it relies on a false dichotomy. Reasons and causes are not mutually exclusive, and rationality could be physically realized in a causal system, just as logic can be physically realized in electronic circuits. A convincing response to this objection is difficult to articulate with precision, but those who remain unpersuaded voice misgivings arising from the intuition that such an account leaves no "work" for rationality to do—it becomes epiphenomenal.

The basic idea behind the line of reasoning sketched above goes back as far as Epicurus (Honderich 88). In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant argues that for practical purposes, I cannot think of myself as determined, since in all deliberation, I implicitly take determinism to be false. One could sketch a Kantian style argument that determinism involves a pragmatic contradiction runs as follows. I cannot think of myself as unfree. That is, the thought that I am unfree is unthinkable for me. But determinism entails that I am unfree. Therefore determinism entails an unthinkable thought, and is thus itself unthinkable for a being like me. The logic in this case is closer

to that of Moore's paradox. Some "deterministic ironists," if they may be so called, appear to assert the following: "As a matter of objective truth, we are unfree, but being what we are, we must think of ourselves as free." The problem is that this seems to commit its advocate to a position that is not merely ironic, but incoherent: "Determinism is unbelievable, but I believe that it is true." In short, while determinism is eminently rational from a scientific or third-person perspective, it appears to border on absurdity when considered from an existential or first-person point of view. A confusing and painful kind of intellectual paralysis—what Wittgenstein calls a mental cramp—seizes the person who attempts to entertain the thought of determinism reflexively.

Apart from the open future question and the pragmatic contradiction prospect, determinists—and belief-desire theorists more generally—face a third difficulty of an existential nature, which has been called the problem of the disappearing agent. Opponents of the belief-desire model worry that this picture leaves out something essential—namely the very doer of the deed, the agent, or the subject of action. On this way of looking at things, there seems to be nothing distinctive about actions as such. All that one can talk about are neurophysiological events or happenings—the agent who brings these events about appears to be missing from the scene. Thomas Nagel expresses this disquiet as follows in *The View from Nowhere*:

> Something peculiar happens when we view action from an objective or external standpoint. Some of its most important features seem to vanish under the objective gaze. Actions seem no longer assignable to individual agents as sources, but become instead components of the flux of events in the world of

> which the agent is a part. The easiest way to produce this effect is to think of the possibility that all actions are causally determined, but it is not the only way. The essential source of the problem is a view of persons and their actions as part of the order of nature, causally determined or not. That conception, if pressed, leads to the feeling that we are not agents at all, that we are helpless and not responsible for what we do. […] *[M]y doing* of an act—or the doing of an act by someone else—seems to disappear when we think of the world objectively. There seems no room for agency in a world of neural impulses, chemical reactions, and bone and muscle movements. Even if we add sensations, perceptions, and feelings we don't get action, or doing—there is only what happens. (110 – 111)

Elsewhere Nagel refers to the encroachment of the objective view on our sense of self as "the gradual erosion of what we do by the subtraction of what happens" ("Moral Luck" 38). There are many other philosophers besides Nagel—including several prominent Wittgensteinians—who share his concern. A. I. Melden, for example, articulates it in this way:

> It is futile to attempt to explain conduct through the causal efficacy of desire—all *that* can explain is further happenings, not actions performed by agents. The agent confronting the causal nexus in which such happenings occur is a helpless victim of all that occurs in and to him. (qtd. in Davidson, 19)

Alfred Mele shrugs off the misgivings that Nagel and others voice about the standard model of action in a somewhat disdainful manner:

> Nagel's worry is not worrisome. Cats and dogs are part of the natural order. If radical skeptical hypotheses are set aside—for example, the hypothesis that everything is a dream and that all biological entities are brains in a vat—it is plain that cats and dogs act. They fight, eat, and play. When they do these things they are acting. The same is true of humans, even if people are part of the natural order. Supernatural beings (e.g., gods and ghosts) are not part of the natural order. That a being needs to be supernatural in order to act is an interesting proposition, but it is difficult to take that proposition seriously in the absence of a powerful argument for it. (17)

But the claim that there is nothing troubling about the belief-desire approach is unconvincing. I cannot help thinking that some naturalistically inclined philosophers let their commitment to their—admittedly compelling—theoretical position on action blind them to the practical challenge that such a position presents to our first person view of ourselves. It may indeed be plain, as Mele insists, that cats and dogs are part of the natural order and that they nevertheless act, and we may think it no less plain that the same is true of us. But for all that, there is a perplexing disparity between the scientific and the pre-scientific accounts of what the difference between my raising my arm and my arm's rising consists of, to use Wittgenstein's example.

Granted, the folk-psychological notions employed in the pre-scientific account—including a particular understanding of free will that undergirds the belief in ultimate moral responsibility—may well turn out to be impossible to specify precisely. Worse, they may even turn out to be conceptually incoherent, as Nietzsche argues in a famous passage:

> The *causa sui* is the best self-contradiction that has been conceived so far, it is a sort of rape and perversion of logic; but the extravagant pride of man has managed to entangle itself profoundly and frightfully with just this nonsense. The desire for "freedom of the will" in the superlative metaphysical sense, which still holds sway, unfortunately, in the minds of the half-educated; the desire to bear the entire and ultimate responsibility for one's actions oneself, and to absolve God, the world, ancestors, chance, and society involves nothing less than to be precisely this *causa sui* and, with more than Munchhausen's audacity, to pull oneself up into existence by the hair, out of the swamps of nothingness. (BGE 21)

Nevertheless there is a problem, and it will not do simply to insist with Mele that there is none, just because a convincing solution eludes us. We have a deeply rooted—if poorly considered—self-conception that fits much more easily into a libertarian than a naturalistic framework, and it might be that the abandonment of this self-conception would emphatically not "leave everything as it is" and allow us blithely to carry on as before. Compatibilism may be a popular view among philosophers, but most non-philosophers—in the West at any rate—are incompatibilists "by instinct." Ramsey famously objected to behaviorism on the ground that it required its proponents to "feign anesthesia." Might it be said with equal justification that determinists and belief-desire theorists are forced to feign passivity? Nietzsche, at any rate, grasps the nettle, and argues that our beliefs about what goes on when we act are seriously mistaken.

4. Agency and Causal Power

For me to act, it must be the case that *I cause* something to happen—according to the folk-psychological view anyway. Nietzsche insists that this view of action is based on questionable ontological assumptions, and claims that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (GM 1.13). The agent, or the "ego as cause" as he puts it, is not empirically given, and thus it is a concept to which we do not have a right (BGE 16). Much of the tension between the folk-psychological and the naturalistic views of action springs from the fact that modern physics does not have much use for the concept of causal powers of the kind that acts of will traditionally conceived would constitute instances of. Nietzsche notes that "science has emptied the concept causality of its content and retained it as a formula of an equation, in which it has become at bottom a matter of indifference on which side cause is placed and on which side effect" (WP 551). He contends that our ordinary ideas about causation are illegitimate anthropomorphic projections, derived from a misinterpretation of our experience of *willing*. "We have absolutely no experience of a cause; psychologically considered, we derive the entire concept from the subjective conviction that we are causes," that, for example, our limbs move in response to acts of will on our part. "But that," he retorts, "is an error." (WP 551). "We believed ourselves to be causal in the act of willing," he writes in *Twilight of the Idols,* "we thought that here at least we caught causality in the act….Meanwhile we have thought better of it….The will no longer moves anything, hence does not explain anything either—it merely

accompanies events; it can also be absent….There are no [conscious] mental causes at all. The whole of the allegedly empirical evidence for that has gone to the devil" (6.3).

Nietzsche's argument, in brief, is that there could not be any empirical evidence for conscious mental causation, since everything would seem exactly the same to us whether it was actual or not. He maintains that the conscious antecedents of action, which we take to be motivating *causes*, can be seen as the *effects* of unconscious psychological, and ultimately physiological, processes. "What is really later, the motivation, is experienced first," he writes; i.e. before the stimulus that actually brought it about. "What has happened? The representations which were *produced* by a certain state have been misunderstood as its causes" (TI 6.4). An underlying physiological state gives rise first to a conscious representation and then to an instance of behavior, and we commit the *post hoc* fallacy. "Why could a 'purpose' not be an epiphenomenon in the series of changes in the activating forces that bring about purposive action," he asks in an unpublished note, "a pale image sketched in consciousness beforehand that serves to orient us concerning events, even as a symptom of events, *not* as their cause?" (WP 666).

In Newtonian mechanics, the closest analog of the pre-scientific notion of a cause is the concept of a force, which the *Oxford Dictionary of Physics* defines as the "agency that tends to change the momentum of a massive body" (Daintith). In other words, a force is that which *causes* a change in momentum. But, as the same source has it, since in keeping with Newton's third law, if "a body A exerts a force on body B, then B exerts an equal and opposite force on A," it follows that "every force could be described as 'a reaction'" (457). This is the root of the problem. There is no such thing as a cause that is

not at the same time an effect: anything that *acts on* something else does so only by virtue of *reacting to* some other thing that acted on it first, and whether one applies the label of cause or effect to an event is relative to the perspective from which one regards it. From a scientific standpoint, every action can with equal justification be regarded as a reaction. This means there are no "actions" in the pre-theoretical sense of autopoiesis or origination, only "reactions." It does not really matter, as we saw Nietzsche said, on which side cause is placed, and on which side effect.

Here is another way of spelling out the difficulty. Causality, writes Rose-Mary Sargent in *The Oxford Companion to the History of Modern Science*, "refers to the power or propensity that an object or event has to produce a change in itself or in another object or event. In the history of modern science, however, there has been no agreement about the concept, or even the existence, of causality." While individual scientists may find it extremely difficult as human beings to resist thinking of the phenomena they examine in terms of causal explanations, such explanations are not really essential to the framing of scientific theories as such. Rather, scientific theories furnish us with mathematical descriptions of phenomenal regularities, which if accurate allow us to predict with confidence the future states of observed systems. But since the whole idea of causal powers is unscientific and mysterious, it follows that action too must be problematic from a scientific perspective.

The point is that on a naturalistic view, strictly speaking, nobody *initiates* or *originates* anything. We are merely *conduits* or *vessels* for the transmission of external forces. Alfred Mele's objection notwithstanding, in a sense *it is true* that only a

supernatural being can act, if by acting we really do mean initiating something in the fullest sense of the word. Every mechanical cause is also an effect, and thus—loosely speaking—its "power" is not its own, but is borrowed from the cause that transmitted it, and the same applies to that cause in turn, and so on *ad infinitum*. Really to initiate something would be to act as an Aristotelian first mover, or *primum mobile*.[86] But none of us is the source or the mainspring of our actions on a naturalistic view; none of us is a driving force absolutely, since all of us, so to speak, are driven. Spontaneity—not the medieval idea of voluntariness, but rather the quality of arising exclusively from causes internal to the agent—appears to be an illusion.

Reflections like the foregoing—if dwelt on from a first person standpoint—can bring about an *experiential* loss of agency that can manifest itself in several forms. Different thinkers employ different metaphors according to the supposed degree of self-alienation involved. A. I. Melden, as we saw above, describes the unfortunate belief-desire theorist as "a helpless victim of all that occurs in and to him." Galen Strawson asks us to imagine a woman rather like Camus's *étranger*, whom he calls "the Spectator" and who is "detached from her desires—from her motivation generally—in some curious way." This woman "acts, and for reasons that she can give, but it is as if it is not really she who desires, decides, and acts, but rather as if her desires and beliefs work it out among themselves beneath her detached, spectatorial, inward gaze" (234). And in *Daybreak* Nietzsche sketches a deflationary account of agency according to which the

[86] Compare Chisholm: If we have libertarian freedom "then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us, when we act, is a prime mover unmoved. In doing what we do, we cause certain events to happen, and nothing—or no one—causes us to cause those events to happen" (12).

role of the intellect in practical reasoning is reduced to that of a plaything in the struggle between competing drives:

> *[T]hat* one *desires* to combat the vehemence of a drive at all…does not stand within our own power….What is clearly the case is that…our intellect is only the blind instrument of *another drive* which is a *rival* of the drive whose vehemence is tormenting us….While 'we' believe we are complaining about the vehemence of a drive, at bottom it is one drive *which is complaining about another* (109).

What all of the views cited above have in common is the idea of the self as essentially helpless, or passive, a patient as opposed to an agent, a spectator rather than a participant. In all of them the existence of the subject of experience is affirmed, while that of the subject of action is problematized. But the phenomenal consciousness of unfreedom, the feeling of helplessness in the face of events to which reluctant determinists may find themselves driven results—I submit—from the unnoticed influence of a tenacious, but questionable, conception of the self that both Nietzsche and Buddhist thinkers reject. If determinism is true, then one must pursue it through to its conclusion. If determinism obtains in the physical world, then it must obtain in the mental world also, regardless of how we theorize the relation between them—otherwise there would be a conspicuous disconnect between what went on in our minds and in our bodies. Normally, one experiences oneself—whether veridically or not—as the unproblematic agent of one's actions, but if the "external world" were subject to determinism, while one's "inner

world" were not, one would frequently find oneself "willing" to do *x*, but in fact doing nothing or *y* instead.

Determinists in the grip of the feeling of helplessness are under the spell of a residual dualism. They are misled by the Cartesian assumption that consciousness is like some "inner sanctum" somehow exempt from the universal causation that prevails in the extra-conscious world. Although few contemporary philosophers would assent to this view expressed as a *theory* of mind, most of us are arguably still *pre-theoretically* committed to some such picture, and the combination of this dualism with determinism seems to bring about an uneasy sense of total powerlessness. Galen Strawson writes that "a genuine belief in determinism…uneasily coupled with an unreconstructed conception of self, may produce a *total paralysis* of all purposive thought as it is ordinarily conceived and experienced" (102). The Rinzai Zen master Hakuin vividly describes what sounds like such an experienced state of total paralysis during the course of his attempt by meditation to escape from his karma—as he would put it—and gain an insight into his lack of selfhood: "Night and day I did not sleep; I forgot both to eat and rest," he writes. "Suddenly a great doubt manifested itself before me. It was as though I was frozen solid in the midst of an ice sheet extending tens of thousands of miles. A purity filled my breast and I could neither go forward nor retreat. To all intents and purposes I was out of my mind" (*Selected Writings* 118). But of course—if determinism is true—it not the causal nexus that holds us captive, but rather our attachment to a misleadingly dualistic picture, as Nietzsche urges in a remarkable passage from *The Wanderer and his Shadow:*

> *Mohammedan fatalism*.—Mohammedan fatalism embodies the fundamental error of setting man and fate over against one another as two separate things: man, it says, can resist fate and seek to frustrate it, but in the end it always carries off the victory; so that the most reasonable thing to do is to resign oneself or to live just as one pleases. In reality every man is himself a piece of fate; when he thinks to resist fate in the way suggested, it is precisely fate that is fulfilling itself; the struggle is imaginary, but so is the proposed resignation to fate; all these imaginings are enclosed within fate.——The fear most people feel in face of the theory of the unfreedom of the will is fear in face of Mohammedan fatalism: they think that man will stand before the future feeble, resigned, and with hands clasped because he is incapable of effecting any change in it: or that he will give free reign to all his impulses and caprices because these too cannot make any worse what has already been determined. The follies of mankind are just as much a piece of fate as are its acts of intelligence: that fear in face of a belief in fate is also fate. You yourself, poor fearful man, are the implacable *Moira* enthroned even above the gods that governs all that happens; you are the blessing or the curse and in any event the fetters in which the strongest lies captive; in you the whole future of the world of man is predetermined: it is of no use for you to shudder when you look upon yourself. (61)

In "The Conceivability of Mechanism," Norman Malcolm states that determinism "presents a harsh and perhaps insoluble antinomy to human thought" (299). Kant, as is well-known, attempts to solve this antinomy by postulating the existence of a noumenal self that transcends the natural order, and arguing that although the phenomenal self is bound by causality, the noumenal self is not. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* he claims that "there is not the smallest contradiction in saying that *a thing in appearance* (belonging to the world of sense) is subject to certain laws of which the very

same *as a thing* or being *in itself* is independent" (113). But perhaps one would do better to adopt the approach that Kant took in solving the first two mathematical, as opposed to the second two dynamical, antinomies. One might argue not that the propositions that we are free and determined are both *true*, albeit in different senses, but rather that both propositions are *false* in that they depend on the unjustifiable assumption of the existence of the self. In other words, one could say that it is not the case that I am free, but neither is it the case that I am unfree, much as it is not true that the present king of France is either bald or hairy. The dilemma of freedom versus determinism might then be dissolved somewhat in the manner of a Wittgensteinian pseudo-problem.

5. The Phenomenology of Non-Voluntary Action

This strategy—which could be called meta-compatibilism—is the one that Nietzsche adopts in highlighting the dualistic "error of setting man and fate over against one another as two separate things." If the idea of the subject as some kind of metaphysical atom or thing-in-itself that exists separately from conditioned phenomena is merely a conceptual fiction as Buddhists argue—if "every man is himself a piece of fate," as Nietzsche puts it—then one is equally confused whether one makes a futile attempt to act in a way completely unconditioned by the circumstances that constitute one as the being that one is, or alternatively, despairs of the efficacy of any such attempt, and sees oneself as some kind of victim of one's circumstances. "Suppose someone were thus to see through the boorish simplicity of [the] celebrated concept of 'free will' and put it out

of his head altogether," Nietzsche writes, "I beg of him to carry his 'enlightenment' a step further, and so put out of his head the contrary of this monstrous conception of 'free will': I mean 'unfree will,' which amounts to a misuse of cause and effect" (BGE 21). Both the struggle against fate and the resignation to it are imaginary; both depend on deceptive oppositional thinking in which a conventional distinction between the agent and his or her situation—including the agent's characteristic inclinations—is misguidedly taken as grounded in ultimate ontological facts. But if Nietzsche (and the Buddhists) are right, we should not think in terms of "my drives and I," since there is no "I" apart from the conditions that constitute me. Furthermore, we should beware of misunderstanding such conditions "according to the prevailing mechanical doltishness which makes the cause press and push until it 'effects' its end," as Nietzsche warns. "[O]ne should use 'cause' and 'effect' only as pure *concepts*, that is to say, as conventional fictions for the purpose of designation and communication—*not* for explanation" (BGE 21).

"Fate" should not be superstitiously personified as a kind of contrary superhuman being, who can be provoked, defied or tempted into thwarting and hindering human plans. "The unconditioned necessity of all occurrence has no compulsion about it," writes Nietzsche; "he stands high in knowledge who has thoroughly realized and felt this" (qtd. in Stambaugh *The Other Nietzsche* 92 – 93). It is wrongheaded to relate oneself to fate on the pattern of a clash of wills. Since everybody is "a piece of fate," rather than a plaything or a puppet of fate, it makes no strict sense, according to Nietzsche, to think in such terms. In Nietzsche thought, fate is not some mysterious and dreadful force that holds us captive—it is just a word for the way that things are:

> Daoxin said to the Zen master Sengcan, "I beg your compassion—please give me a way of liberation." Sengcan said, "Who is binding you?" Daoxin said, "No one is binding me." Sengcan said, "Then why seek liberation?" At these words Daoxin was greatly enlightened. (Keizan 116)

Nietzsche's intuition that humanity and fate are not opposed is what leads him to adopt the attitude of *amor fati:* to claim that he "wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity" (EH 2.10). Although *amor fati* is never explicitly referred to in *Zarathustra*, the whole book is informed by this attitude. In the section entitled "On the Great Longing," Zarathustra speaks to his soul at length. He christens it, not in the name of Christ, but of Dionysus, "the vintager who is waiting with his diamond knife": "O my soul, I took from you all obeying, knee-bending, and "Lord"-saying; I myself gave you the name 'turning of need' [*Wende der Not*] and 'destiny.'"[87] This *Wende der Not*, as Joan Stambaugh points out, is a play on the word *Notwendigkeit*, or necessity. The submission to fate, when thoroughly carried out, results in a gestalt switch by virtue of which one no longer experiences fate as an alien force, but identifies with it as one's ownmost nature. In *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* Nishitani Keiji comments in some detail on this *Wende der Not*:

> Under the compulsion of the need or necessity (*Not*) that prevents one from becoming oneself and from becoming free, one is forced to descend into the abyss

[87] Kaufmann mistranslates *Wende der Not* as "cessation of need."

> within. But once one is freed within the abyss, the need is turned into an element of this life of freedom. When Zarathustra calls his own soul "turn of need" (*Wende der Not*) and "fate" (*Schicksal*), he means that the turn of need, in which necessity is turned into an element of the life of the free soul, is the soul itself. In this case necessity becomes one with the creative. (52)

What Nishitani is getting at in saying that necessity becomes one with the creative is that in certain states of activity—of which the polished execution of a piece of performance art is perhaps the paradigm—the feeling that one has no alternative but to act as one does is experienced as liberating rather than limiting. If it seems to one as if one is faced with alternatives, then one is compelled to deliberate between them, and in pausing to deliberate, one interrupts the flow of activity that is responsible for the feeling of freedom and creative power. "One has attained to mastery when one neither goes wrong *nor hesitates* in the performance," as Nietzsche puts it (D 537).

However one understands action ontologically, it is undeniable that one *experiences* certain events as actions proper, because they seem to be brought about *by oneself*. The experiential difference between actions and occurrences which the action theorist Carl Ginet calls "actish phenomenal quality" is in general easily discernible:

> The mental act has what we may call (for lack of a better term) an *actish* phenomenal quality. This is an extremely familiar quality, recognizable in all mental action, whether it be mentally saying, mentally forming an image, or willing to exert force with a part of one's body. The only way I can think of to describe this phenomenal quality is to say such things as "It is as if I directly

> produce the sound in my 'mind's ear' (or the image in my 'mind's eye,' or the volition to exert), as if I directly make it occur, as if I directly determine it"—that is, to use agent-causation talk radically qualified by "as if." (13)

But this clear distinction doesn't always hold. Actions that we perform habitually, or impulsively, or unselfconsciously lack this "actish phenomenal quality," but we do not normally feel constrained in so acting. Indeed, most of the actions that we carry out in what Heidegger calls the mode of "ordinary everydayness" are such that the concepts free and determined cannot properly be applied to them at all from a phenomenological perspective. In fact, even the less metaphysically loaded concepts of voluntary and involuntary are not really appropriate. When one walks naturally, or breathes normally, does one do so voluntarily or not? No sooner is the question posed, than one is forced to redirect one's attention away from the world and toward one's actions in such a way as paradoxically to "separate" oneself from them slightly. In most circumstances it then becomes reflectively obvious that whether one continues to walk or breathe is "under one's control" and thus "voluntary" in the sense that one is not aware of any impediments to either doing or stopping what one is doing (though of course unknown to oneself, such impediments might exist). Nevertheless, this description, while unproblematic as long as too much is not made to hang on it, is a description of a different state of consciousness from the one that immediately preceded it. It is a *function* of the question to which it constitutes an answer—*before* the question is put, one puts one foot before the other, and one breathes in and out, neither voluntarily, nor

involuntarily, but *non-voluntarily*, or *not involuntarily*, perhaps.[88] It is no coincidence that in Zen practice one's awareness is directed towards simple non-voluntary actions like walking and breathing as a means of loosening the grip of one's sense of self.

Frequently in performing ordinary everyday actions, one is free neither in the Sartrean sense of having no alternative but to choose between alternatives, nor yet quite in the Spinozan sense of understanding the determinants of one's action. One is, *pace* Sartre, free from the allegedly inescapable burden of freedom. "Shouldering a staff you wander this way and that, East or West, South or North, knocking at the wild stumps as you please," as Yunmen put it (qtd. in Watts, *The Way of Zen* 132). One does not experience oneself as having to deliberate and decide, but simply as "doing what comes naturally"—though, of course, as soon as one is struck by this thought, the naturalness of the activity in which one was immersed is lost, and one does face options from among which a selection must be made.

In most cases, it is only relatively simple actions that can be performed in this non-voluntary fashion. More complex tasks normally demand of us a different approach, in which calculation and conscious decision-making play a much larger role. But ideally

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[88] I wish to distinguish this sense of non-voluntariness from another sense which is more familiar in action theory: namely the sense in which unwanted or unintended but foreseeable side-effects of voluntary actions cannot strictly be said to be *involuntary*, but instead are called *non-voluntary*. Such non-voluntary consequences of action feature in the doctrine of double effect, which has its roots in Thomist ethics, according to which it is not permissible to perform a bad act as a means to a good end, but it may be permissible to perform a good act in the knowledge that some bad results may be unavoidable. "Collateral damage"—or the killing of innocent civilians in the course of fighting the enemy in wartime—is a classic example.

for Nietzsche even complex undertakings should be carried out in this "free and easy" way. "One acts perfectly only when one acts instinctively" he claims (WP 440), whereas "[c]onsciousness is the expression of an imperfect and often morbid state in a person" (WP 289). While learning to ride a bike, for example, one has to concentrate so as not to lose one's balance, but in time one stays upright without thinking. "All perfect acts are unconscious and no longer subject to will" (WP 289). In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche contrasts thinkers and scholars for whom "every necessity [is] a kind of need…a painstaking having-to-follow and being-compelled" with creative types for whom, in a manner of speaking, necessity is the mother of invention:

> Artists seem to have more sensitive noses in these matters, knowing only too well that precisely when they no longer do anything "voluntarily" but do everything of necessity, their feeling of freedom, subtlety, full power, of creative placing, disposing, and forming reaches its peak——in short, that necessity and "freedom of the will" then become one in them. (213)

In certain exalted moods, one's sense of oneself as a deliberative agent is suspended, and one engages the world in a state of receptivity and creative responsiveness in which the felt distinction between actions that one brings about and events that one merely experiences is blurred or even overcome entirely, as Nietzsche's account of inspiration illustrates:

> If one had the slightest residue of superstition left in one's system, one could hardly reject altogether the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely

> mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces….One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightning, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form—I never had any choice….Everything happens involuntarily in the highest degree but as in a gale of a feeling of freedom, of absoluteness, of power, of divinity. (EH Z 3)

In *Twilight of the Idols* he is even more succinct. "All that is good is instinct—and hence easy, necessary, free," he avers. "Laboriousness is an objection; the god is typically different from the hero. (In my language: light feet are the first attribute of divinity.)" (6.2). This effortless but highly effective creative activity that Nietzsche describes in these excerpts recalls the Daoist ideal of *wu-wei,* or non-coercive action, as the following characterization by Edward Slingerland from his monograph on the subject should make clear:

> "Wu-wei" literally means "in the absence of/without doing exertion," and is often translated as "doing nothing" or "non-action." It is important to realize, however, that wu-wei properly refers not to what is actually happening (or not happening) in the realm of observable action but rather to the state of mind of the actor. That is, it refers not to what is or is not being done but to the phenomenological state of the doer….It describes a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one's spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and yet nonetheless accord perfectly with the dictates of the situation at hand, [and] display an almost supernatural efficacy (7).

Just as for Nietzsche, it is the *feeling* of freedom from compulsion that is vital, for the Daoists, what matters is the actor's state of mind. In Zen too, one develops one's abilities to deal resourcefully with whatever one encounters to the point where one's actions on the whole are performed in this non-voluntary (but not *involuntary*) manner. Eugen Herrigel's archery teacher told him to learn how to shoot by observing a bamboo leaf that "bends lower and lower under the weight of the snow [until suddenly] the snow slips to the ground without the leaf having stirred….[W]hen the tension is fulfilled, the shot *must* fall, it must fall from the archer like snow from a bamboo leaf, before he even thinks it" (48). Persons accomplished in the art of *wu-wei* will respond to stimuli without the slightest gap intervening, so much so, that they do not feel as though they are *reacting* to events, but *participating* fully in their unfolding; a state of being captured in the familiar Zen image of "a ball [tossed] on swift-flowing water" (Cleary and Cleary 437).

Undoubtedly the approach sketched here does not resolve all the difficulties associated with naturalistic theories of action. Epistemological worries about the rationality of determinism remain, as do metaphysical concerns about the openness of the future, and ethical problems about the concept of responsibility. But this meta-compatibilist approach does suggest a way that persons upon whom the thesis of determinism forces itself in certain states of reflective self-consciousness, and produces a Wittgensteinian "mental cramp" might try to overcome this distressing phenomenological paralysis. It is the implication that "*I* am unfree" that makes determinism troubling for so many, and Nietzsche and Buddhists encourage us to see through this conclusion as unwarranted. In Zen practice one recaptures what is called one's "original mind" in a

kind of post-reflective state of lived immediacy. One's objectifying awareness of one's self as a conditioned entity vanishes—and the attendant perplexity as to how such an entity might be free vanishes along with it. "Let the agent disappear," says the Zen Buddhist in effect; "this is not the problem that you think it is; things will go better if you do!"[89]

In *Freedom and Belief,* Galen Strawson asks us to imagine "an enormously congenial world" in which "a race of gifted, active creatures" dwell "who are never undecided in any way; who never hesitate in any way about what to do; who never consciously deliberate about what ends to pursue, or about how to pursue them—having no need to; and who always succeed in doing what they want to do." One could call these beings "pure natural Epictetans—never failing, never disappointed in their congenial world, always able to do what they want to do because always wanting to do only what they are able to do," he writes (249-250). Their experience would be very unlike ours, and their notion of freedom very poorly developed, since properly to know what freedom is requires being acquainted with its opposite.

Yet what about persons who *are* acquainted at first hand with phenomenological unfreedom, but who have contrived, by dint of habitual self-discipline, to reach a stage in which their abilities and aspirations are so integrated that their interactions with the world proceed with the unforced grace of the natural Epictetans? I submit that such a description applies equally to accomplished Daoists and Zen Buddhists, who maintain

[89] Alan Watts cleverly titled his autobiography *In My Own Way,* suggesting thereby that he had lived his life *on his own terms*, but had often been *an obstruction to himself.*

what the *Zhuangzi* calls "tranquility in disturbance," (Fung 1: 239) and to Nietzsche's ideal individual for whom "peace of soul" is "the expression of maturity and mastery in the midst of doing, creating, working, and willing—calm breathing, *attained* 'freedom of the will'" (TI 5.3).

Afterword

Parmenides said, "nobody thinks that which is not"; we are at the other extreme, and say "what can be thought must certainly be a fiction." Thinking has no grip on reality, but only on- - -

—Nietzsche, NF-1888, 14[148]

Yen-yang asked Chao-chou, "What if I have nothing with me?"
Chao-chu said, "Throw it away."
Yen-yang said, "If I have nothing with me, what can I throw away?"
Chao-chu said, "In that case, keep holding it."

—Zen dialogue[90]

I have argued in this dissertation that Nietzsche's impression of Buddhism was distorted—in large part owing to his Oedipal struggles with Schopenhauer and Wagner—and that if he had understood it better, he would have appreciated it more. I have drawn attention to points of contact between his thought and Buddhist thought on themes connected to suffering and compassion, and proposed a reading of eternal recurrence on which it functions to facilitate an existential reorientation towards the present moment that is very much in the spirit of Zen. I have also argued that apparently irresoluble differences between the Nietzschean and Buddhist positions on questions relating to a karmic "moral world order" can be overcome on a careful interpretation, and lastly that the spiritual significance attributed to a particular kind of spontaneous action by both Nietzsche and Zen thinkers constitutes an important parallel.

[90] Qtd. in Aitken, *The Practice of Perfection* 128.

But in undertaking any comparative study there is a risk of overemphasizing broad commonalities at the expense of narrower distinctions. Of what thinker could it not be truly said—with respect to any great opposing philosophical system—that if she had understood it better, she would have appreciated it more? How can one be sure that apparent similarities between Nietzsche and Buddhism are not specious where they are more than superficial?

One reason to think that this is not so in the present case is that in addressing itself to the problems posed by suffering, Buddhism speaks to what Nietzsche called "the problems that trouble me" (WLN 111 – 112). Book after book and day after day, Nietzsche grappled with the causes and effects of suffering, and thus when he arrives at an answer that reminds one of a solution previously reached in Buddhism, at least one has grounds to think that what one is dealing with are answers to related questions, although precisely this fact can sometimes lead Nietzsche to obscure such resemblances as do obtain.

It is revealing for instance in *The Birth of Tragedy* when Nietzsche styles tragedy as the means by which "the profound Hellene" saved himself from the "danger of longing for a Buddhistic negation of the will" (7). It is revealing because he later describes *"the mystery doctrine of tragedy"* (itals. in orig.) as "the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent [and] the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil" (BT 10), and this is a doctrine which, while admittedly vague, admits of a straightforward (Mahāyāna) Buddhist construal.

My point is that Nietzsche has a tendency to exaggerate differences between his own views and certain close analogues, partly from ambivalence about the allure of views that he finds threatening, and partly from a kind of anxiety of influence. Thus, as we saw in the chapter on Wagner, he writes to Peter Gast: "I confess that it gave me a real fright to realize *how* closely I am *akin* to Wagner" (SL 190). Thus too he admits jokingly to Franz Overbeck in 1882 that a central idea that he has recently developed is a variation on a familiar Christian theme: "I am in a mood of fatalistic "surrender to God"—I call it *amor fati"* (SL 184). (Note how both of these self-disclosures occur in his private correspondence.) And thus, having spent many of the intervening years distancing himself from his first book, in 1888 he acknowledges that by proclaiming his Dionysian faith that "only the particular is loathsome, and that all is redeemed and affirmed in the whole" (TI 9.49), he again touches "that point from which [he] once went forth: *The Birth of Tragedy,"* and specifically, it could be added, the Buddhist sounding passage above (10.5).

In the introduction I said that it was unfortunate that Nietzsche was unfamiliar with Mahāyāna thought, as he would have most likely have been very sympathetic to it. Graham Parkes writes that "if [Nietzsche] had had access to the world of later Buddhist thought he would have found the atmosphere there philosophically bracing and the ideas much to his own taste" (14 – 15), and for my part, I agree that Nietzsche stands much closer to the Mahāyāna than he does to early Buddhism. But although evidence can be presented to support counterfactuals of this kind, they are of course not strictly verifiable, and so caution must be exercised in adducing them. Admirers of early Buddhism can

make similar claims on their side by insisting that Nietzsche did not have *proper* access to the branch of the religion that *they* favor.

Thus Robert Morrison wonders at one point whether if Hermann Oldenberg—whose *Buddha: Sein Leben, seine Lehre, seine Gemeinde* was a major source of Nietzsche's knowledge of Buddhism—had not mistranslated a Pāli term meaning "thirst for self-annihilation" as "thirst for impermanence,"[91] Nietzsche might have reconsidered his view that *early* Buddhism was nihilistic, given that "thirst for self-annihilation" is listed among the causes of suffering in the second Noble Truth (51). It is certainly reasonable to point to weaknesses in the literature on Buddhism that was available to Nietzsche in order to explain his negative assessment of it, but Morrison seems to assume that Nietzsche was as interested in "getting Buddhism right" as a dedicated fellow scholar of Buddhist studies would be. After all, Nietzsche had plenty of access to and a good knowledge of reliable scholarship on Christianity, but while his interpretation of Christianity is devastating and insightful, it could hardly be accused of being measured or fair.

The claim that "if person *x* knew what *I* know about subject *y,* then *x* would have the *attitude* that I do to *y*" can be a fallacious appeal to the authority of one's own intuition unless sufficiently compelling reasons are provided to support it. And the temptation to make such assertions is especially strong when one wishes to explain away certain recalcitrant ideas of thinkers with whom one has much—but not everything—in

[91] Oldenberg mistranslated *vibhava-taṇhā* as *der Vergänglichkeitsdurst,* rather than *Selbstvernichtungsbegehren.*

common. Thus Nietzsche himself, who is temperamentally drawn to Jesus, but ideologically opposed to certain of his teachings, squares a circle of this kind by having Zarathustra claim that Jesus "died too early; he himself would have recanted his teaching, had he reached my age" (Z 1.21).

And yet for all these reservations, I accept the idea that Nietzsche *would* have recanted much of *his* teaching about Buddhism if only he had been acquainted with the Mahāyāna. One wishes that Nietzsche—who quoted approvingly the Buddha's injunction: "Do not flatter your benefactor!" (GS 142)[92]—could have read the fifteenth century Zen monk Ikkyū's irreverent poem "I Hate Incense":

> A master's handiwork cannot be measured
> But still priests wag their tongues explaining the "Way" and babbling about "Zen."
> This old monk has never cared for false piety
> And my nose wrinkles at the dark smell of incense before the Buddha.

And when one reads, again in *The Gay Science,* that in making an aesthetic judgment, Nietzsche always poses a key question, "is it hunger or superabundance that has here become creative?" (370), one wishes he knew this exuberant piece by the fourteenth century Zen monk Musō Soseki:

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[92] In a footnote to this section in his translation of *The Gay Science* Kaufmann identifies Nietzsche's source for this quotation as Emerson's essay "Gifts": "It is a great happiness to get off without injury and heart-burning, from one who has had the ill luck to be served by you. It is a very onerous business, this of being served, and the debtor naturally wishes to give you a slap. A golden text for these gentlemen is that which I so admire in the Buddhist, who never thanks, and who says, 'Do not flatter your benefactors.'" Nietzsche marked this passage and underlined this quotation in his copy of Emerson's *Essays.*

All worries and troubles
have gone from my breast
and I play joyfully
far from the world
For a person of Zen
no limits exist
The blue sky must feel
ashamed to be so small

Nietzsche's own exuberance and dynamism inspire in him a distrust of all attempts to uproot the passions, and a wariness of anything that calls itself "peace of soul" (TI 5.3). In most moods, he prefers instead the perpetual agonistics epitomized by the archetypal modern man of Goethe's drama *Faust.* And so his published work begins—the first sentence of his first book—and ends—the last of his last—with a *versus,* and he claims in the opening section of *The Antichrist* that one needs a *goal* for happiness. "Willing no more and esteeming no more and creating no more," cries Zarathustra in this vein, "oh, that this great weariness might always remain far from me!" (Z 2.2). But although Nietzsche praises self-assertiveness in many passages, there are reasons to suspect that this is not his highest ideal.

Immediately after Nietzsche's first ever sustained discussion of the will to power in the section of *Zarathustra* "On Self-Overcoming," Zarathustra makes fun of the "ascetic of the spirit" who stands "with a swelled chest and like one who holds in his breath." He says that he loves the "bull's neck" on the "sublime one," but that he also wants to see "the eyes of the angel." The hero "must still discard his heroic will; he shall

be elevated, not merely sublime: the ether itself should elevate him, the will-less one." Having thus apparently privileged will-lessness over willfulness, Zarathustra mischievously proceeds to subvert another binary opposition between the beautiful and the sublime: "But just for the hero the *beautiful* is the most difficult thing. No violent will can attain the beautiful by exertion….To stand with relaxed muscles and unharnessed will: that is most difficult for all of you who are sublime" (Z 2.13). It seems that when self-assertiveness is sublated in a mood of *amor fati,* reality is affirmed just as it is; and in such blissful states of consciousness there is nothing for the will to power to will:

> I cannot remember that I ever tried hard—no trace of *struggle* can be demonstrated in my life; I am the opposite of a heroic nature. "Willing" something, "striving" for something, envisaging a "purpose," a "wish"—I know none of this from experience. At this very moment I still look upon my future—an *ample* future!—as upon calm seas: there is no ripple of desire. I do not want in the least that anything should become different than it is; I myself do not want to become different. (EH 2.9)

It appears evident that the author of passages like this—whose alter-ego beseeches his disciples to *"remain faithful to the earth"* (Z 1 prologue 3; itals. in orig.), and contends that "soul is only a word for something about the body" (1.4)—would have been delighted by the closing lines of Hakuin's "Song of Meditation":

> At this moment what do you lack?
> Nirvana is right in front of you.

This very earth is the Lotus Land of Purity,
And this body is the body of the Buddha.[93]

But of course, there can be no question of *proving* that he would. In this regard, Bernard of Clairvaux once said of Abelard that he only proved himself a heretic in sweating to prove Plato a Christian. And I can only hope that I have not proved myself a fool in struggling to suggest that Nietzsche—in *some* respects at least—was of the *Buddha's* party without knowing it.

[93] I have combined the translations of Stephen Addiss (*Zen Sourcebook* 251) and D.T. Suzuki (*Manual of Zen Buddhism* 140) here.

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The Birth of Tragedy, Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morals, The Case of Wagner, and *Ecce Homo* can be found in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche. Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Twilight of the Idols, The Antichrist* and *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* can be found in *The Portable Nietzsche.* Unless otherwise indicated in the text by means of a parenthetic reference to one of the print editions of Nietzsche's works listed below, translations from the *Nachgelassene Fragmente* in the online *Digital Critical Edition* are my own.

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Vita

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